ねじ巻き精霊戦記

天鏡のアルデラミン

Alderamin on the Sky XIV

宇野朴人

キャラクター原案 さんば挿

Illustration 竜徹

XIV

Uno Bokuto presents

電撃文庫

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Alderamin on the Sky
XIV
「互いの布陣の開帳といこうか、ソローク」
「今回の先攻はお前だな、ジャン」
Uno Yokuto
presents
ILLUSTRATION:RYUTETSU
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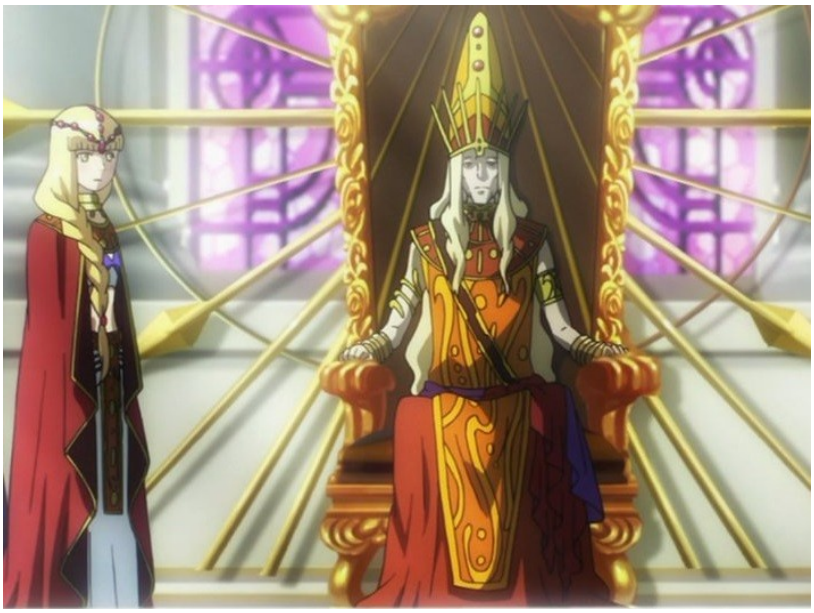

Alderamin on the Sky

ろ！そいつを黙らせろ！！
「いいや今すぐ絞め殺せ！！」
「ざけるなよ貴様ア！！」
まで、
畜生を英雄と崇めていたのか……!?」

ねじまき補完戦記
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Alderamin on the Sky
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The sunlight on that day felt gentler than usual.
This was the palace erected in the center of the Imperial Capital Banhataal. In the vast courtyard separated from the outside world, there were two oak trees about two meters apart.
They weren't trees that fit in with the style of the palace. There were many bigger trees in the courtyard, including ancient trees comparable to a national treasure. In comparison, these two trees were planted just a few years ago.
「── Ahh, they make me forget about the time.」
But the Imperial Field Marshal Ikuta Solork liked these two trees a lot. The branches shaded the area just right, and the distance was suitable for a hammock. This was an irreplaceable resting spot that he chose and selected himself.
「... Hmm, I know why you are always late for meetings.」
The girl muttered with a smile. The person lying on the large hammock beside the youth was the Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik. She usually spent her time with him indoors, and would only come out for fresh air during rare days with great weather.
「... Do you remember? You are the first one who taught me how to lie this way.」
『Of course I remember. I was just teasing you, and was worried that you will complain to me.』
The youth smiled mischievously. On the hammock that was swaying in the gentle breeze, Chamille clinged onto Ikuta beside her.
『I pardon your crimes… Because Yatori already taught you a lesson.』
『Ughh. You might be saying that you forgive me, but you have been kicking me a lot recently...?』
『New crimes are a different matter. Be it now or in the past, you will hit on older women whenever you see one.』
『Banning me from flirting is like asking me not to breath.』
The youth shrugged with a wry smile. At this moment── footsteps on the grass could be heard. The girl snapped to attention and sat up from her hammock.
『Good Afternoon… Erm, am I intruding on something?』
The jade-eyed youth said with a polite smile. Chamille stared with her eyes wide open.
『Torway? When did you get back to the palace...!』
『Just now. It's been a while, Your Majesty.』
『His training just ended yesterday, so I asked him to come over── I haven't seen you for a month, Torway.』

「Yes, but it doesn't feel that long since we chatted through the Sprites. The training was tough, but the frequent talks with Ik-kun and Ma-kun motivates me greatly.」
Torway said with a cheerful smile. In the meanwhile, another figure appeared from behind him.
「Oh, Torway got here first? ── long time no see, Your Majesty.」
The pudgy youth looked at the crowd and said. Having another unexpected guest made Chamille jump off her hammock.
「Matthew, you are here too!」
「Ikuta told me to make time for a day off today, and I rushed here from the southern territories.」
Matthew nursed his waist that was sore from the long ride as he said that. Beside him, Haro brought over a tea set with a bright smile.
「It's been so long, Torway-san. Did you get skinnier?」
「Great to see you, Haro-san. Don't worry, I didn't lose weight. I got more lean and heavier instead.」
The youth answered confidently with a pat on his chest. Haro checked him out carefully.
「── Hmm, you're right. Your complexion is better than before, and your body condition looks fine… That's great.」
「Oh, you got right to work. As expected of the first mental health management officer of the Empire.」
「Fufufu. Matthew-san, you put on a little more weight, right?」
「Ughh…! I-It can't be helped, the navy pushed a load of souvenirs to me, and asked me to eat them. I can't let them rot either…」
Matthew pouted and groaned. Sensing that the navy was taking great care of Matthew, Ikuta smiled a little deviously.
「The exchange program seems to be going well── are things going well with Pol-chan too?」
「It's going smoothly… No, don't just talk about me! We haven't met for so long, so everyone must have tons of things to say! Ehh── Oh, right, how's your injury, Haro?」
「Hmm, how about an arm wrestling match? We will know the answer immediately from that.」
Haro rolled up her sleeve with a smile. Torway looked at their interaction, then smiled and looked at the clear sky.
「The weather is great, why not have the tea party right here, Ik-kun?」
「That's why I ask you all to come. We can get people to bring chairs over, but the grass is lush here. Let's just sit down somewhere under the shade.」
Ikuta got off the hammock and urged everyone on. The members of the Knights Corp sat down on the grass as he suggested. Her field of vision got much closer to eye level, and Haro felt a strange sense of nostalgia and said:
「Ahh── I remember this feeling.」
The other four felt the same too. Matthew answered absent mindedly:

「... That's right. All of us sitting around like this reminds me of our days as Officer Cadets.」
「Fufufu. Ik-kun was always hogging Safi's wind.」
「I always believe that pretty boys have low body temperature and are resistance to heat.」
「There's a limit to how unscientific you can be...」
Chamille pinched the back of the youth's palm with an abhorred look.
Matthew sipped the tea Haro served and exclaimed:
「... This iced tea tastes great. There are so many ice cubes, but it isn't diluted at all.」
「Oh, you can tell? The ice cubes are made from tea.」
「That's one extra step in making tea... Hmm, it's cold and tasty. It will be a joy to drink this when my body is heating up.」
Everyone felt a moment of respite from Haro's iced tea. Matthew then looked at the hammock between the trees and sighed.
「You finally built a nest in the palace... I'm impressed by how far you take your lazy nature.」
「Well, this is just the beginning. I'm thinking about setting a hammock between those two spire towers.」
Ikuta pointed to the two towers on the palace grounds and said. The blonde girl frowned.
「Spire tower... You mean the Right Sword Tower and Left Shield Tower? Those two towers that are 37m tall?」
「As expected of Ik-kun, even your napping spots are amazing.」
「If I want to make this a reality, I will have to deal with the law regarding air space. My proposal for the next meeting is already completed, so I want to lay the ground works now...」
「Hey, someone stop him! He will really do it!」
When Ikuta got into the specific steps to take, Matthew grabbed his shoulders and shook hard to stop this debauchery. This scene made the other three laugh out loud.
「— It makes me forget the time.」
Haro suddenly looked up into the sky and muttered. Their conversations stopped and the other four looked up too. A flock of birds flew right across their field of vision.
「If only all the problems would end without anything happening... Things won't be that simple though.」
Matthew couldn't help saying an unobtainable wish. Torway said in response:
「Somewhere in Kioka— there might be someone looking up at the same sky and thinking about the same thing.」
With anti-war sentiments gaining traction in both countries, there were more people who didn't want war compared to those who wanted one. With that ironic fact in mind, Ikuta snorted and said.

「I have laid in my hammock in all sorts of places and watched the sky countless times, but I have never seen a day that's suitable for war.」
The youth turned sullen after saying that sarcastically, then squinted:
「However── if it is the last thing I see, I will prefer a clear day… Since I can have a good dream if this is my eternal slumber.」
His words sounded weak willed. Ikuta acting different from usual surprised the four of them, and Matthew refuted:
「Hmmp, what's the Field Marshal holing up in the headquarters saying? We would all be dead before you die as the commander in chief.」
He stated an obvious fact. Haro and Torway then said:
「That's right, Ikuta-san. Not just you, it will be troubling if we don't survive.」
「We won't die so easily, Ik-kun.」
The jade-eyed youth promised strongly. Seeing that his comrades had grown more reliable, Ikuta raised the corners of his lips and wiped away his fragility.
「Yes, that's right── Haro, can I have another cup, please?」
「Yes, right away!──」
When Haro was reaching for the teapot for a refill── Ikuta's partner Kusu received a notification and connected the call.
「── **Reporting to the Field Marshal. The Kioka Army is marching towards the east of our borders! I repeat, the Kioka army is marching──**」
Surprisingly, none of the five people gasped at that report.
「…」
Ikuta looked at his comrades present. He looked at them finish their cup of tea and smiled:
「… We managed to make time to have tea together.」
Torway, Matthew, Haro and Chamille all nodded with a smile. Instead of being sad that their peaceful moment had ended, they were glad to have spent this irreplaceable time with their comrades.
「Alright, let's begin── It's time for war.」
The dark-haired youth told them as he used his walking stick to stand up, then pulled the cape on the hammock over his shoulders. He walked towards his station in his uniform of the Imperial Field Marshal── the Empress who had made a secret resolve in her heart, and capable veteran officers followed behind him.
The peace that was as precious as gems had ended. And the Final battle begins.

Chapter 1: Start of the Final Battle

The Empire and Kioka had different strategic ideas about their all out confrontation.
With that in mind, the classical way of waging war by determining a place and gathering their forces would not be possible. A place that was advantageous to one side would naturally be disadvantageous to the other. And given the huge discrepancy in numbers between the strongest weapon in modern times, the Blast Cannons, the Empire would not choose to fight in the plains.
The highest chance of victory would be a defensive battle where they engage the invading Kioka forces in turn. In exchange for destroying their lands, they could predict the enemy's route of advancement and pick a terrain that was advantageous for the defenders. And it was easy to get supplies in their own country too.
On the other hand, Kioka still had to invade the Empire despite knowing that. They couldn't plan around engaging the enemy invaders. The longer they dragged, the lesser their advantage in Blast Cannons numbers would be. And if the Empire took the initiative to invade, that would mean they were confident of winning with their equipment. Waiting for that to happen would be putting the cart before the horse.
One side was the Imperial army fortifying their defences and waiting for the attack. On the other side were the Kioka forces who had to strike despite knowing that fact.
However— even with how things stand, Kioka wasn't at a disadvantage.
「— Artillery unit, forward march!」
There was no need for words, just seeing this scene explains everything. Rows upon rows of steel cannons were drawn by the horses. Just the first rank had 30 cannons. As for the ones that follow— It would be hard to tell their numbers without overlooking them from on top of a hill.
The Kioka army prepared 6,122 Blast Cannons for this battle. The horses pulling these cannons were three times this number, and they were manned by a crew five times of that. With the mass production of Blast Cannons, 30,000 soldiers were trained in the operation of this new formation, which showed how much Kioka thought this new formation would be the key to this war.

「... I'm starting to worry whether this battle will reduce the Empire into ash...」
At the rear of the artillery procession, an officer beside the commander said quietly.
After learning the power of the Blast Cannons through their thorough training, he was aware of the devastating firepower of this artillery division. And soon, they would execute a destruction that probably had never been seen in history before── that made him feel relieved and afraid of their reliable firepower at the same time.
Sensing his worries, his superior snorted.
「We can only hope the Imperials will make a wise decision, and surrender before their land is reduced to dust.」
「Yes, I'm hoping for this same thing without a hint of sarcasm… I wish they could see this too. What can stop the advance of this army? We have enough firepower to destroy a mountain, a manmade fortress is nothing──」
「── How many do you think there is?」
The female soldier asked quietly from the tall platform. Her subordinate who was proning beside her answered cautiously:
「... I can see 3,000, and estimating from the scale of their unit, 5,000 will be a good gauge.」
She gulped at the estimated number of cannons. It was clear how serious Kioka was about this. They have spent an imaginable amount of budget to prepare their troops.
「We have to observe this carefully… This will be a harsh battle, it will be bad if we make a mistake at this stage.」
「Yes!」
「── It's over 5,000? I see.」
Imperial Central Base Commander's Office. After receiving the report, Ikuta Solork expressed his sincere awe and nodded.
「Incredible── I'm not complimenting that white pretty boy, but the political prowess of Ario Kyakushii. How much budget did he wrest from the Parliament to assemble that number of cannons?」
The youth muttered with a bitter smile── One advantage of a monarchy over a democracy was the ability to dictate a policy. But when facing that Prime Minister, this didn't matter either.
「Sigh, I'm not surprised. I thought he would do that── Connect me to General Shiba.」
Kusu started the call immediately, and got through in less than 5 seconds.
「Kubalha Shiba speaking. I heard there is an outrageous amount of cannons, but we will be proceeding as planned, right?」
「Yes, of course. Please prepare for trench warfare in the first defence line.」
「Got it. How exhilarating.」
He ended the call with a laugh. The 「Twin Jewels of the Sun」 felt as reliable as ever to Ikuta, and he pushed on his table to stand up.
「── Alright then, I should get in position.」

The youth moved from his desk to the center of the commander's officer where 20 chess boards were set up. The shape of the board and the pieces on it all differed from the original. They were tools to help him visualize the upcoming battle and the change in the situation.
「Well then── You'll be making the first move this time, Jean.」
Four hours after the Imperial Army sent the observation report. The leading elements of the advancing Kioka Army were about to cross the borders.
「── Alright, the first fortress is almost in sight, Mazeya.」
The commander watching through his telescope at the front ranks said. He was about 50 and wore the empaulatte of a colonel. He was Kioka's Frontline Commander for the first stage of the battle, Colonel Gatra Decaic.
「The scouts should be back soon.」
His deputy, Major Mazeya Emden, answered. They were less than 2 km away from the enemy fortress they were spying at. The large octagonal military facility seemed to be emphasizing that this was the end of the plain leading westwards, and had served as the first wall against Kioka invasion since 120 years ago── Iron wall Fortress Orwa.
「If we want to defeat the Empire, we have to capture Orwa with half of our might. This saying has been going on since my Officer Cadet days.」
「The same still applies now. If we want to invade the Empire through land routes, the only alternative is to take the path where the Aldera Holy Army crossed over the Grand Arfatra Mountains.」
「The Brilliant General is in command over there. It's a shame we can't use that route this time.」
「I like the tall mountains, and dream about climbing the Grand Arfatra Mountains and making a pilgrimage to Ra Saia Alderamin one day── but I don't recommend bringing Blast Cannons along for the trip.」
Major Mazeya's joke made Colonel Gatra laugh. Even the most devoted followers of the Church of Aldera would keep saying they would go one day without actually doing it── so much that the pilgrimage to the Grand Arfatra Mountains became a term to mock people.
「It's better to take this route this time. I don't know how many soldiers are garrisoned in the fort, but they are just targets for the Blast Cannon.」
「What if they come out and fought us on the open field?」
「That will save us the effort of capturing the fort.」
Colonel Gatra said confidently. At this moment, an officer hurried to their side.
「── Reporting! The scouts have returned after reconnaissance the fort!」
「So, how many troops do they have?」
Colonel Gatra asked immediately. However, the officer was hesitant to speak.
「... There are... zero.」
A silence hung over them. After a moment of confusion, the Colonel furrowed his brows.
「... Zero?」

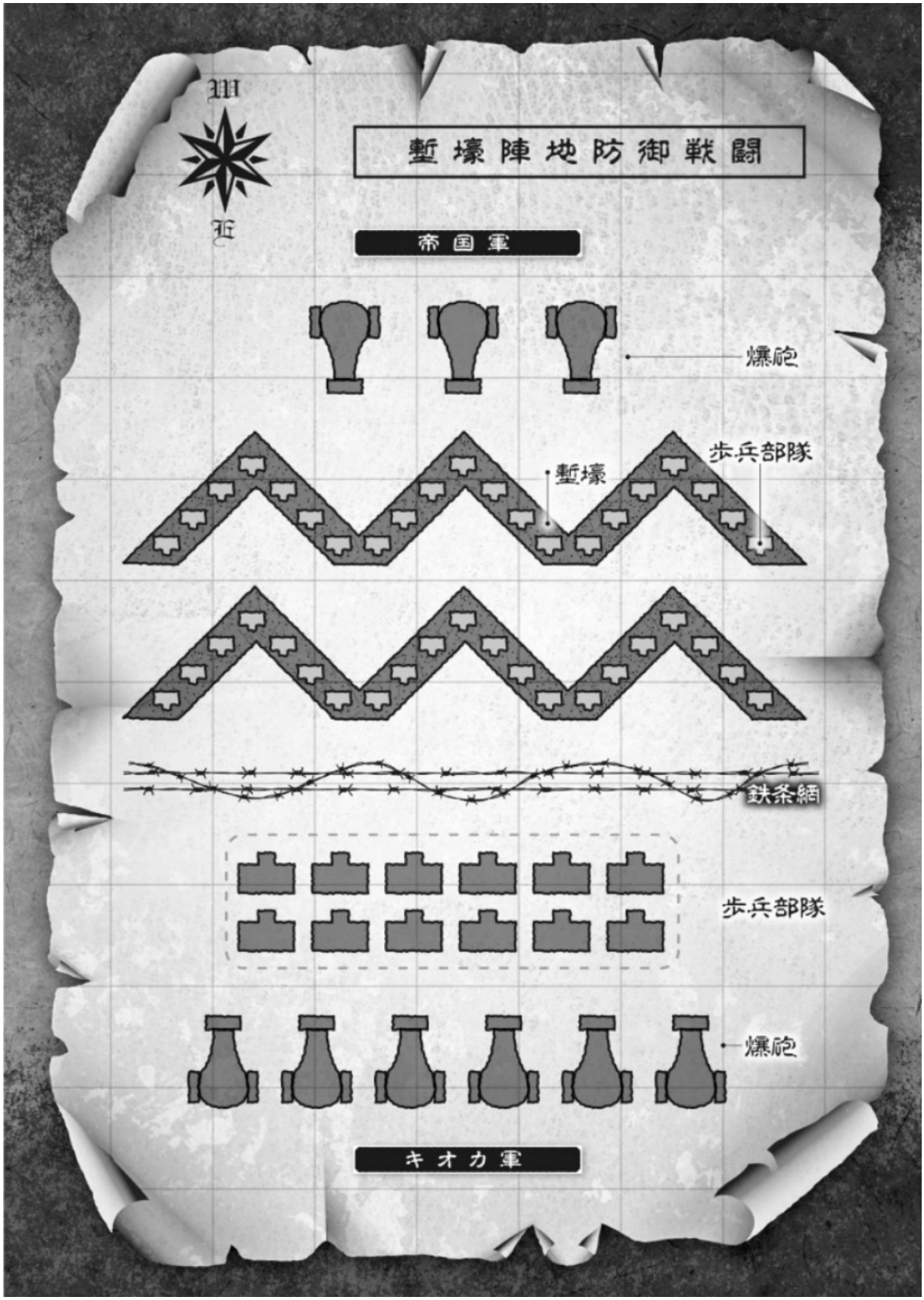
「The fort is empty. The enemy didn’t engage when we approached, and it is easy to sneak in too. Furthermore, there are no terrain to hide a substantial force around here.」
Feeling more confused by the report, Colonel Gatra found it hard to judge the situation and turned to his adjutant.
「Is this one of the scenarios you predicted?」
「It is… But for the enemy to be absent, this is…」
Major Mazeya carefully chose his words── They already predicted that the enemy might have laid down a trap. For example, using the soldiers garrisoned in the fort as bait and attacking from behind. But in all these scenarios, it didn’t include one that had the fort left empty.
「Never mind. If they are abandoning this place, then we can just take it. Contact Major General Arkinex to confirm.」
The commander pulled himself together and made a call with his Sprite. A few seconds later, he received a reply.
「**── This is Commander-in-Chief Jean Arkinex. How’s the situation, Colonel?**」
「Yes Sir. The first fortress we passed along our route is unmanned. I would like to consult with you on our next course of action.」
「**It’s empty?**」
「Yes Sir, the reports say there are no signs of anyone. Is it fine for us to capture it?」
Colonel Gatra asked, expecting his proposal to be accepted. However, his expectation was subverted.
「**No, shell it.**」
「—Huh?」
「**Bombard the fortress. Decimate it, it doesn’t matter if it is empty.**」
Bombard an empty fort. A few seconds after receiving that order, he confirmed hastily.
「I-Is that fine, Major General Sir? We won’t have many chances to secure a base in enemy territory in the future.」
「**You have my orders, Colonel.**」
The white-haired officer didn’t explain further and simply restated his decision. Colonel Gatra straightened his back from the pressure, then cut the call after acknowledging that order.
「... Prepare for bombardment.」
「We are shelling an empty fort?」
「I already confirmed that is the commander-in-chief’s decision, there is no doubt about this.」
His firm voice was no longer wavering. His deputy nodded and issued the orders to the artillery unit. This was the biggest reason why Colonel Gatra was picked as the Frontline Commander. No matter what happens, he wouldn’t doubt Jean Arkinex’s decision.
「Ready to Inject Dynamic Air, Colonel!」
「Yes, proceed!」

The artillery started moving and injected Dynamic Air into the steel tubes. Colonel Gatra imagined the pressure building up in the Blast Cannons and shouted loudly with his arms crossed:
「I don’t know the Commander-in-Chief’s intent, but just think of this as target practice.」
「Yes Sir…」
His deputy who still couldn’t accept this completely answered vaguely. The artillery was ready in no time, and the Colonel ordered:
「Begin the bombardment!」
Shells were fired with a loud bang, and the ear drums of the artillerymen turned numb, even the grass by their feet was shaking. A few seconds later, the shell landed on their mark, crushing through the ceilings and the walls. The debris fell onto the ground.
「Hmm, it’s as powerful as we thought. This fort is on the large side, but it won’t stand——」
The commander grunted, happy with the effectiveness of the shelling. However—— he didn’t see the next wave of attack. The entire fort exploded before their eyes.
「——Huh?」
「—— **T-The fortress exploded! Report, the enemy fortress has exploded! It didn’t crumble but exploded! After just one barrage…!**」
The surprised voice of his subordinate could be heard through the Sprite. In contrast with his panic, the white-haired officer was as cool as a cucumber.
「*Yah**
—— as I expected.」
Jean said as he looked at the map laid out on the table. Without waiting for the report, the fort had been marked as ‘unusable’ with a cross.
「Don’t panic, this is only natural. Even if the forts are meaningless before the Blast Cannons, that Ikuta Solork won’t just abandon a fort.」
He was certain that Dynamic Air was used to induce the explosion. That was a technique Jean used himself during the battle of the Grand Arfatra tableland. The revolutionary part about it is, depending on the side that meddled with it, the explosion could destroy the terrain or building in an instant. Jean had already seen through that an unmanned fort along their route was a suitable bait.
「If we send in the troops rashly, it will result in tragedy—— you understand right, Colonel? Follow my orders to the letter. If you encounter anything unclear, contact me first. Instead of racking your own brain, you should trust in my judgement. Understand?」
「Y-Yes Sir
…!」
The commander’s wavering voice expressed his intention to obey, and the white-haired officer cut the call. Miara who was standing by said:
「We ran into Ikuta Solork’s trap right away… We really can’t let our guard down.」

「This can’t even be called a trap. This is just a greeting at best between us.」
Jean said with a smile── this wasn’t a surprise. After three prior battles and the 「trial of god」 they knew each other’s capabilities very well.
「Next will be the opening battle── let’s show each other our formation, Solork.」
While the army was moving to intercept the attack, in a port a long distance to the south of the Imperial Capital Banhataal, the Imperial Navy who received word of the Kioka invasion took action.
「Heave ho…」「Bring the next barrel!」「It’s all here!」
The sailors carrying barrels bustle between the ship and the port. To prepare for a long voyage, the ship was loaded with provisions. Thanks to the water purification function of the Water Sprite, they could get portable water in the ocean, but the food for the large crew was huge by comparison. For warships loaded with weapons and munitions, just loading it would take half a day.
「── Sir! Where are you, Admiral Jurgus Sir!」
In a corner of the port that was busy on the eve of battle, a youth was wandering with a troubled face. He was a communication officer serving as Erynphin Jurgus’ adjutant. There were many issues he needed to consult his superior with, but he couldn’t find the man in question.
「Ughh, where did he go── Uwah?」
He was standing on tiptoe to survey the port when he heard the sound of water from the breakwater behind him. Something was climbing up to shore. He turned around in surprise and found Admiral Jurgus right there. He was only wearing an underwater suit and was completely drenched, and held an oyster in his hand.
「Phew── Sigh, 6 minutes is my limit. I haven’t dived for a while, and had regressed.」
The dripping wet Admiral Jurgus muttered. The adjutant was surprised by his perfect physique and squeezed out:
「A-Admiral Sir──」
「Oh, it’s you. What’s the matter?」
When the Admiral noticed him, water splashed from behind him.
「Puwah──! How’s that, uncle!?」
With that, a similarly soaked woman climbed up. She was the niece of the Admiral, Naval Lieutenant Polminue── she was holding a large oyster too. The two of them held out their oysters. Both were large── but on a closer look, Admiral Jurgus’ oyster was a size bigger.
「It’s my win! You still have lots to learn.」
「Ughh」!」
Pommy stamped her feet vexingly when she saw her uncle’s grin. Ignoring the stunned adjutant, Admiral Jurgus said:
「That’s a nice warmup. Go back to your ship, Pommy, your crew must be getting antsy.」

「Yes yes yes, as the Admiral commands.」
Pommy said fearlessly before turning and leaving. Adjutant watched her go with a stiff face and then asked:
「M-May I ask, what were you doing?」
「What were we doing? We were just competing in picking oysters. Its to boost morale before we leave port, and also to play with my niece.」
Admiral Jurgus answered frankly with his eyes to the sea.
「Why don't you try it? This is a war you can't win without smelling like sea water.」
「...!」
His words made the adjutant open his eyes wide. The next moment, he put his Sprites and personal effects on the ground before diving into the sea with a big splash.
「Pwah── W-Will this do!?」
「── That's fine... but you are surprisingly bold.」
Admiral Jurgus said with an expression that was a mixture of surprise and amusement, and offered a handkerchief to his adjutant climbing onto the breakwater.
「I can feel your guts── give me your report.」
「Yes Sir!」
Pommy ran in the port towards her ship. When she saw her comrades who were searching for her, she yelled:
「Everyone, I'm back」!」
The crew turned towards Pommy in response, and her colleagues, Paume and Yorin stood shoulder to shoulder and grumbled.
「What do you mean by 'I'm back'!? You are late, Captain!」
「Where did you slack off to!? The preparations are almost done!」
「Sorry! I was picking oysters!」
Pommy rushed up the gangway with a poor excuse, then stopped suddenly. Because a familiar old man was waiting for her there.
「Hurry up and get ready, it's unsightly for the leading ship to fall behind.」
「Gramps Kutchi?」
The veteran Captain of the 「Tyrannosaur」 she used to serve on, Naval Commander Ragieshī Kutsuchi. He had retired from the frontlines because of chest illness, and came here to send Pommy off.
「I want to go with you, but...」
「...Gramps Kutchi...」
Pommy frowned with a lonely face. However, the old man shook his head.
「Is this the time to feel depressed over an old man? ── Go then, Pommy. It's your generation's turn to shine.」
「... Yes!」
Pommy straightened her back and saluted, then rushed up the gangway. She checked the deck to confirm all the preparations were done, then ordered the crew to raise anchor and set sail, then climbed up the mast to the crow's nest.

□Hmm── the weather is great.□
She muttered as she looked at the clear blue sea, took a deep breath── then started to sing.
□──**The sun rises~ The seagulls sing**──□
The crew didn’t stop moving and listened quietly to her song. They lost themselves in the song marking the start of a voyage since ancient times, and bid farewell to the land they might never step on again.
□──**Board the ship~ Undo the ropes~ Sail forth and never turn back──!**□
The song was carried by the sea breeze to the flagship, where Admiral Jurgus was.
□Great lungs── You know the duty of the leading vessel very well, Pommy .□
He muttered quietly with a smile── he wasn’t aboard the □Yellow Dragon□ that was used in the Battle of Port Nemong. It couldn’t be used for tactical reasons, and the three mast □Red Dragon□ that was two sizes smaller took on the role of flagship. Admiral Jurgus sailed on this ship during his time as a Naval Commander.
Admiral Jurgus listened to his niece’s song while he slid a knife into the giant oyster in his hand. After shucking the oyster, he was about to eat it raw when he saw a white glint and stopped.
□Oh, this is a good sign.□
He picked it up with his fingertips── a pearl so large that it couldn’t be found easily on the market. It sparkled brightly under the sunlight.


塹壕陣地防御戦闘
帝国軍
爆砲
歩兵部隊
塹壕
鉄条網
歩兵部隊
爆砲
キオカ軍

After marching a few hours away from the ruined fortress, the Kioka army finally found the enemy waiting for them in formation.
「... This is...」
Colonel Gatra was filled with doubts after looking through the telescope. That was only natural since this was a formation he had never seen before— Rows of trenches spread out over a wide area, and the Imperial soldiers manning them. They held their weapons warily from behind steel wire fences, blocking the Kioka army's path.
「... The Major General did tell me his prediction, but seeing it in the flesh is really remarkable. I can imagine a small unit guarding a narrow path, but for such a large force to be entrenched...」
「However, this is very logical. Since fortress are meaningless now, then deploying in the fields with minimal ground work will waste less resources.」
Major Mazeya analyzed calmly, and his superior concurred with a nod.
「We can see that they are prepared— so now, we will test how well prepared they are.」
He looked behind him, where the neat rows of artillery stood— he was shivering from the majesty of the Blast Cannons deployed on the ground, and raised a hand quietly.
「Start the bombardment!」
After ample preparations were done, he gave the order. Deafening explosion rang out everywhere.
Countless shells blotted out the sun and rained down on the enemy. They were like birds of prey, and after flying out with the smoke, they swiftly descended on their prey on the ground.
「Incoming!!」
The soldiers covered their heads under the trenches. Some couldn't help trembling, others recited the scriptures from the Church of Aldera. All of them desperately cast out the image of being blown to shreds in the next instant.
Bzzt! The heavy impact continued— One barrage shot out more than 2,000 shells. This destructive carnage would have decimated any normal fortress. However—
「... Ughh...!」「... Ughh… Ahh...?」
As the shelling continued, the Imperial soldiers started to realize. Their body and limbs were still intact. The trenches were still holding and protecting them.
「I-I'm still alive.」「We are not dead.」
「We can hold the line...! If we stay in the trench, we can hold out against the bombardment!」
After experiencing how effective the trenches were against the bombardment, their morale rose. Given how the ground being bombarded looked like, this was a shocking result.
First of all, none of the trenches were blown apart by the explosion. The spots near the points of impact might be crumbling a little, but it was within

repairable range. Most surprising of all, the steel wire fence before the trench was standing strong. Even the places that were blown by the wind of the explosion remained intact. The bombardment was strong enough to shatter the sturdy fortress, but couldn’t destroy the relatively thin wires. The thickness of the wires were the biggest reason why it survived. Most of the impact passed through the fence made from thin wires. It was harder to destroy the steel wire fence then smashing the thick fortress walls.

「The next barrage is coming! Take cover──!」

There wasn’t much time for them to feel relieved before the tremors and explosions assaulted the Imperial soldiers again. However, the troops enduring the shelling had different faces from the first bombardment.

「... We can fight...」「... That’s right, we can fight...!」

They could challenge the overwhelming barrage of the Kioka forces. That idea took root in their chest and fortified their fighting spirit.

「── It’s not very effective? *Syah** , as expected.」

On the other hand, Jean who was listening to the result of the bombardment from the frontline commander accepted this fact without feeling surprised.

「This is the expected result. The combination of steel wire fence and trenches is the best answer against our bombardment right now. If they want to fight a defensive battle, there is no better plan than this.」

He calmly complimented the enemy’s troops and preparedness. Unlike the officers on the frontlines, he was never intoxicated by the destructive might of the Blast Cannons.

「The trenches to defend against the shelling, and the steel wire fence to guard against people. The obstacles that supported each other were far sturdier than it looks. The key to this war is how to defeat their defences.」

「...Ugh...」

「Listen up, do not send the infantry forward. If they charge ahead, our forces will be dragged into a quagmire. Opening a bloody path by piling the bodies of our troops onto the steel wire fence── you won’t want to be recorded in history for such an atrocity, right?」

Jean warned his subordinates sternly. Commanded by a famous general and possessing a huge number of advanced weapons── these conditions made his men hope for a swift and powerful attack, and he needed to dash that hope early. He needed to let them know that this battle would be a tightrope walk from beginning to end.

「Don’t be hasty about attacking, we just need to test out our equipment for now. There is still a lot of time before the main show is ready── let the Imperial soldiers have a nice dream in the meantime.」

From Jean’s expression when he was speaking to his subordinate on the frontlines, Miara could feel it── Jean was confident of traversing this tightrope after considering all possible factors.

In order to attack the entrenched base, the Kioka army took other actions aside from the bombardment.

「Push out the armoured cart!」
An unusual weapon appeared before the Imperial soldiers. It was a wooden cart with steel boards on the front and sides, and had handles behind for pushing. It looked similar to a siege ladder, but was much shorter.
「Advance!」
The carts spread out against the trenches, and moved forth together on command. The Imperial forces immediately opened fire, and sparks flew on impact with the steel boards. The Kioka soldiers scowled their mouths bitterly.
「Damn it, it's heavy...!」
The thick steel boards on the cart protected the soldiers from projectiles, but it was too heavy to be pushed by manpower. Moving on paved even ground might be possible, but it was tough on uneven ground, and they were slow.
Watching their struggles from afar, Colonel Gatra furrowed his brows unhappily.
「We can't expect much from the armoured carts, huh...」
「It's too heavy to be pushed with manpower. Horses can pull it, but not push it. Things might be different if there is a revolutionary advance in propulsion?」
The adjutant added quietly. They sent out the armoured cart in order to cut the steel wire fence set up by the enemy. The goal was to endure the gunfire and reach the fence, then extend a large scissors between the armour gaps to cut the wires. However── their progress wasn't great.
「G-Good, we are halfway there── Wooahh?」
The Kioka soldiers who covered half the distance screamed as they tilted forward. They checked in a hurry, and found a wheel had sunk into the ground── it fell into a pit disguised with cloth and mud. They pulled back in a hurry. If this went on, the entire cart would fall into the pit.
「... The enemy predicted this and made preparations. This won't work.」
「Hmm... Pull them back. We will lose the men if we push in too deep, and won't gain anything.」
Colonel Gatra ordered the carts back without any signs of regret. This operation was to gauge the effectiveness of the armoured cart in the first place, it would just be a bonus if they could achieve results. He was satisfied learning its flaw in its debut battle.
「Look! The enemy armoured carts are retreating!」「Good! The pitfalls are working...!」
The Imperials cheered when they saw the enemy withdrawing. In one of the trenches at the front, a windgunner turned back and shouted at his superior:
「It worked, First Lieutenant Mittokarifu! If it's like this──」
「No── it's scary how calm the enemy is.」

In contrast with the excited soldiers, First Lieutenant Suya Mittokarifu peered through her telescope and answered coldly. Her face remained as serious as the start of the battle when she said:

「If they use the might of the Blast Cannons to cover their infantry's attack, they can score a serious hit. However── be it the armoured cart they sent, or withdrawing it right after a pitfall was found, their emphasis was on not vainly risking the lives of their troops… Which means they have properly assessed the threat of the trenches, even though this is the first time they have seen it.」

When she pointed that out, the excitement vanished from the soldiers' faces. Suya was staring at the enemy formation when a tall figure suddenly appeared behind her.

「Indeed. Just the armoured cart retreating isn't a reason to feel optimistic.」

The man stroked his beard and said. The troops stood stiff when they saw his face. Only Suya smirked without even turning back.

「…General Shiba Sir. Please don't come to the front trenches, commander. Why do you think we have communication Sprites for?」

「Hahaha! Don't say that, beloved disciple of the Regimental Commander. I'm an old soldier, and won't feel at ease without seeing the new battlefield.」

General Shiba said with his hand on Suya's head. She sighed. Maybe it's because of her master disciple relationship with Ikuta, but this man has recently been treating her like a granddaughter. And it was infuriating that she didn't feel mad about that.

「At least keep your head down. I can't protect you if a stray bullet comes flying.」

Suya answered and tugged at his sleeve── She understood General Shiba's wish to watch the battle from close up.

An unprecedented number of Blast Cannons, and an unprecedented trench defence base. For both the Empire and Kioka forces, there were too many firsts in this battle. Using live battle to conduct tests was only natural. They would adjust their predictions to match the facts before them, and figure out how their army would fight in the future── both forces were still in the probing phase.

「Hmm, this pause between bombardment seems really long.」

「It might be a sign they will try something new── all units, take cover under the protective boards!」

Suya ordered in anticipation of what might happen next, and her men quickly took action. They picked up the large boards beside the trenches, then fixed it between the earth wall at an angle before crawling under it. Suya pulled General Shiba's hand and took the same actions.

The shelling soon rang out. It sounded similar as before, but there was a secondary explosion when it was above them. Countless shrapnels rained down on the trenches. The sound of the shrapnels hitting the board made the soldiers shudder.

「... Spread shot, huh?」
Suya nodded in agreement with General Shiba. It was clear that normal shelling was ineffective against entrenched soldiers. To increase the effectiveness in killing the enemies hiding in the trenches, they used shells that explode in midair and scatter its shrapnels── shooting spread shots was a reasonable response.
「However, they are hampered by technical issues. From what I can see, less than a third of the shells explode above us. And we can see from the shrapnels blocked by the protective boards that it's not that scary.」
When the shelling stopped, Suya crawled out before her men did. General Shiba followed her with a grin── Not just in the future, Suya was already plenty reliable now.
「The enemy seems to be testing out their new weapons one by one, I wonder what they will bring out next──」
The next moment, the Sprite in Suya's pouch said:
「── Message from the balloon observation team behind the base! Air surveillance sighted the enemy assembling a huge Blast Cannon! From visual estimations, the barrel is ten times larger than a normal Blast Cannon...!」
The men who heard that turned tense. The communication ended shortly, and the stern faced Suya turned to General Shiba beside her.
「──It's the main event. General Shiba, please return to the rear.」
「... I understand. Stay safe, First Lieutenant Mittokarifu.」
He had to defer to his position this time. The 『Twin Jewels of the Sun』 slid into the trench to the rear, and prayed for the front line unit's safety.
About 1 km behind them. In the observation balloon 200 m above ground, a soldier from the new balloon formation had a cramped face.
「... You are telling me that is a Blast Cannon? Are you serious? That monstrosity is a Blast Cannon?」
The female trooper looking through the telescope muttered for the upteenth time. A few hours ago, they reported "that thing" was being assembled from their special seat in the air.
「This is a bad joke. It's as big as a house.」
「I really wish that is just a big decoration.」
The male soldier operating the balloon beside her replied with a sigh. Her partner continued:
「... Ahh, it's the real thing. They are adjusting the angles. Stop it, it looks just like a cannon now.」
「Maybe not. They might be building a base and then plant a white flag on it.」
The female soldier tried to joke with her partner, but realized she couldn't raise her cramped lips. She felt a chill rising from her soul, then made a call with her Sprite.
「... I never thought we will use this in the opening battle.」

To the rear of the Kioka forces, Colonel Gatra said through gritted teeth. His adjutant shook his head.
「Destroying the enemy with the greatest force we can muster. There is nothing to be ashamed about following the right procedure.」
When he heard Major Mazeya's consolation, Gatra nodded with a bitter face.
「That's right… it is as the Major General said. They aren't so weak that we can win while holding back.」
They looked up at the thing before them as they chatted. It looked like a steel tower from this angle, and would only look like a barrel from a further distance.
I was 8 metres long with the diameter of the bore being 2 metres. It might be larger than normal, but it was still a Blast Cannon. The parts were ferried by many wagons, and the soldiers assembled it after a few hours. The 8 large cannons spread out over a large distance had almost completed its final checks.
「The enemy sent out balloons, so they should have seen this.」
「That can't be helped. We can't move it after it's assembled. Also, even if they did see this, they can't do anything about it.」
「That's right… That will just give them more time to pray.」
He swept away the uneasiness in his heart with that, then looked at the large cannon before him with awe again.
「This is the first time I'm seeing the completed thing. I sincerely think that I'm fortunate to not have been born in the Empire.」
「……」
「Final inspection is complete!」
A soldier ran over from the giant cannon and informed the Colonel. The adjutant gestured with his gaze, and Colonel Gatra nodded firmly.
「Inject Dynamic Air── I will show you the might of Kioka.」
At the same time, the observers in the air conveyed a message through the Sprites.
「── Enemy large cannon has finished adjusting its horizontal angle! It's going to fire!」
When she heard that, Suya turned to her partner Sprite. The report was still ongoing.
「Predicted impact points are a1～a7, b1～b7! The first shell should have a large margin of error! Soldiers within this zone, please evacuate to an adjacent safe zone!」
Suya acted immediately on that information. She shouted loudly to her men in the same trench:
「All units move to C2! Form double files just like the training!」
「Y-Yes Mdm!」「Uwahhh…!」
The soldiers quickly formed up in two files, but their movements were messy, so Suya admonished them firmly:

「Don’t panic, the passage is cramped! Don’t break file formation and block your comrades behind! We will all fall if you hold up the line!」
She yelled and smacked the back of a person who was breaking formation. While Suya was herding her men off like a shepherd, her adjutant ran to her.
「First Lieutenant Mittokarifu, you should—」
「No, I will bring up the rear.」
Suya was adamant. She crossed her arms and stared at her men move, barely keeping in file formation.
「As long as I’m here, they won’t fall into panic. In this war, I won’t let anyone die in vain.」
「First Lieutenant...」
「It’s fine. Think about it— just adjusting the angle for that monstrous machine would take a lot of time. Enough time for everyone here to move out of the way. Only if the passageway isn’t block because of we got too anxious.」
How to move the entire troop accurately within limited time— with that point in mind, Suya was sure that she should stay until the end as the commander. Seeing that her resolve was firm, her adjutant stood beside her with the same determination.
「...Then, I will accompany you.」
「It’s fine, you can go first.」
「No, I’ll stay with you… Pardon me, but you have a history of misjudging the timing to withdraw, First Lieutenant.」
Her words made Suya frown sheepishly. Like her adjutant mentioned, during the end of the Remeon military coup— she made that mistake during the defensive battle against the Igsem forces. She was too stubborn and missed the timing to retreat, and almost died. Furthermore… her adjutant was the one who saved her by raising the white flag.
「... Since you’re bringing that up, I can’t refute you.」
「Of course. If you don’t reflect on it, then my efforts back then would be for naught.」
The adjutant said with her chest puffed out. Suya snorted, then hung her head to avoid her gaze.
「... Whatever. It’s not my problem if you couldn’t get away in time and got blown away.」
「Don’t worry, I will hold a deep grudge against you if that happens.」
The adjutant answered with a smile, and then turned to warn the soldiers to move in formation. Suya glanced at her back and muttered silently in her heart— *Thank you*
.
「— Vertical angle adjustments completed! Commander, your orders please!」
The moment the soldier reported that preparation of the huge cannon was complete, Colonel Gatra yelled:

「Good… Fire!」
On his orders, the artillerymen took action, lighting the Dynamic Air inside the thick shell The soldiers nearby covered their ears until that moment came.
A violent power shook the ground beneath the cannon. The super sized shell that took one carriage to ferry flew in the sky, an incarnation of nightmare itself. It followed a trajectory into its peak and quickly descended. Anyone who learned ballistics would know the principle. The destructive power of the shell was proportional to its weight and the maximum height it reached. Every shell sunk deep into the earth from its overwhelming weight, and exploded a short while later── tons of earth that made up the trench flew into the sky. No matter how much preparation was made, the trench couldn't endure it. Craters 10m in diameter were blasted at every point of impact.
「Confirmed hit! Damage is unknown, but we have confirmed that we have hit their defensive base!」
「Good」!」
The commander raised his fist high and cheered. He was shaking from the joy of suppressing his enemy.
「See that, this is Kioka's power! We are fundamentally different from you, this is the power of a nation supported by a healthy republic system…!」
「── Damage report! What's the casualty numbers in this sector?」
After the shelling, Sarihasrag who was in command of a section of the trench shouted:
「Six heavily wounded, 27 light casualties! Three missing in action! Probably buried in the dirt…!」
「Estimate their locations and dig them out! We can use the locations of the comrades around them for reference!」
He confirmed the damage report and issued a rescue order. The Remeon second son beside him said:
「Brother──」
「Yes, I know!」
Realizing his intention before his brother even finished, Sariha instructed his Sprite to open a channel and yelled:
「── Hey, you alright, First Lieutenant Mittokarifu!? You're always showing that haughty attitude, so don't die in the opening act!」
Right after that, an unyielding voice answered:
「… Yes, I'm fine! Sorry for subverting your expectations!」
「Dumbass, things will get troublesome if you die! How's the situation over there?」
「Light casualties! My neighbouring sector is falling apart, so we will be searching for any missing people and repair the trench!」
「Good! Don't get too engrossed in digging and missing the forecast!」
「The same to you! That's all for now!」
She cut off the call with an energetic voice. Sariha clicked his tongue.

「She is really arrogant!」
「I think the two of you aren't too different, brother.」
「You are getting chatty, huh!?」
Sariha poked Sushuraf's shoulder before turning and leaving. His buffed younger brother followed.
「— **That's the damage report! The evasive measures are effective, but there are some difference from the predicted numbers!**」
Ikuta who was in the Imperial basecamp listened carefully to General Shiba's damage report from the shelling. The dark-haired youth nodded after hearing all of it.
「No, it's great. Since the damage from the first bombardment is this much, we can minimize it further next time.」
Considering the fact that the damage from the first shelling was within expectations, he continued:
「No matter how well we prepare the trenches, we can't defend against the large caliber Blast Cannons at this stage. We can't do anything about the explosion on the point of impact… However, it is possible to minimize the casualties as much as possible.」
This was the countermeasures Ikuta adopted against the huge cannon they couldn't defend against. The plan was to deploy balloons to watch the enemy's cannon, then predict the point of impact from its angle— and let the soldier evacuate ahead of time. The balloon, communication from the Sprite, and the artillerymen proficient in predicting the point of impact— This was a high level mobile defence only possible by these three elements working in concert.
「Prepare for the next wave of bombardment, and continue the defensive battle. Considering the manpower needed to transport the shells, Kioka can't fire those huge cannons on a whim. As long as that base holds strong, they will be the one exhausting more resources.」
Ikuta stated the advantage of the defenders, but also realized that the enemy knew that too.
「However— Since they left the impression of how powerful the huge cannon is, they can use it as a bluff too. Don't get so caught up by the shelling that you forget their infantry attacks. But we can't continue fighting a tense psychological war either…」
「Yes, leave it to me. I'm confident about how thick my nerves are, so this is a good chance to make it thinner.」
General Shiba said with an unwavering voice. Ikuta felt how reliable the 「Twin Jewels of the Sun」 was on the frontline, but still warned him:
「I'm counting on you. However— do not hesitate when it's time to retreat, this battle is planned around an eventual retreat in the first place.」
「I understand. I swear that I won't let anyone die in vain. Be it the soldiers or myself.」
After confirming that the both of them share the same thought, they ended the call at the same time.

An hour after the attack from the large cannons, the Kioka commanders had doubts about the current situation.
「... They are not showing any signs of fear.」
「... Yes, I think so too.」
The adjutant observed the enemy camp through the telescope in his hand, and nodded in agreement.
「Their destroyed base is being repaired. Are they replenishing their numbers in the trenches, or is the damage they are taking worse than it looks to us...?」
「After that bombardment?... How did they do that?」
「I'm not sure. But the Major General might know.」
Major Mazeya looked to his pouch. Colonel Gatra groaned, and before he could even make a decision, a call came from the Commander-in-Chief.
「── You are saying that the enemy showed no signs of fear after the large cannons attack?」
In the Kioka Headquarters, Jean was confirming the situation.
「Don't need to be surprised. There are several balloons flying behind the enemy position, right? ── That's it. The observers on the balloon predicted where our shells would land. With how big those Blast Cannons are, it will take time to adjust the angles. With enough training and the Sprite communication system, it is possible for the soldiers to evacuate ahead of time.」
Using the new Sprite communication function together with the balloons was an obvious move. The opponent was Ikuta Solork after all. They did all the preparations they could to make this fight possible.
「Even so, the prowess of the large cannons will leave a deep impression on them. If the soldiers will leave the area that the cannons are aimed at, we should make use of that.」
In Jean's mind, the observation period was over. He was certain that the other party felt the same way, and issued his next orders.
「We have shown our cards. *Exkyaazy**──
Good, onto the attack phase.」
Before the time was ripe, he was as quiet as a boulder covered in moss. And when it was time to move, he would act swiftly.
When facing the entrenched Imperial forces, the Kioka army led by Jean followed this principle. The eight large cannons aimed at the right flank of the enemy and all the normal Blast Cannons opened fire at once── when the shells falling like the rain made the Imperial soldiers duck their heads down, the Kioka infantry started their assault.
「Full speed ahead──!」 「The enemy is slow in returning fire! Don't stop!」

The shouts of the Kioka soldiers echoed out loud. The shelling flying above them in an arc, and the infantry attack— This was the coordinated attack of both the infantry and Blast Cannons that the Empire had considered before. Ideally, the infantry should attack after the shelling weakened the enemy as much as possible, but this proved ineffective against the entrenched opponent. Before they waste more shells in this ineffective attack, Kioka turned to the offensive.

「Damn it, engage them—!」「Damn it, don't raise your head! You will get blown away!」

The Imperial soldiers tried to engage, but the nonstop shelling, and the fear and anxiety made it hard for them to aim. Worse of all, the Kioka infantry didn't stay in their ranks, and have spread out into columns. This formation requires a high degree of training, was much more mobile than staying in line formation, and most importantly, made them small targets. This was proof that with the advent of Air Rifles, Kioka was also probing the new ways that wars would be fought.

「Don't panic!— Spread out against the shelling!」

However— a bombardment from the air exploded in the ranks of the infantry charging towards the trenches. Seeing their comrades being blown apart stopped the Kioka soldiers in their tracks.

「Ughh, they are using Blast Cannons too—」「Don't falter! We have more people!」

The officers urged their men onwards, but the shells continued falling in the meantime. The bombardment flew in from behind the entrenched Imperials to counter the Kioka's charge.

「Hit confirmed on the leading elements of the enemy!」「Good— excellent targeting! Keep firing!」

The artillerymen cheered at the successful attack. The Imperial's Blast Cannons numbered less than a tenth of the Kioka forces intercepted the charge. The Kioka commander clicked his tongue at that.

「How is their targeting so accurate…!? Charging in columns makes the target smaller, and they are firing at an arc over their comrades! So what is this accuracy…?」

「— If we can predict how and where the enemy will attack, it's not difficult.」

Ikuta said. On the chess board before him, the pieces were clustered together on one side.

「By using the chessboard to reverse engineer the solution, how will the enemy attack the trenches that spreads to the right and left? Normally, they will attack either the right or left wing— since the retaliatory fire will only come from one of the wings. And to minimize their chances of getting hit, charging in columns will be the sensible option — with the conditions reduced to this, we can aim our cannons at the predicted attack route ahead of time.」

The youth said with conviction. He believed that person would adopt the best strategy. His confidence in the enemy commander gave him the confidence to decide the countermeasure.
「I changed the undulation of the terrain slightly to push them into these attack routes. Since this is our home ground, the Blast Cannons position had been arranged ahead of time, and we knew what angle to fire at to hit anywhere on the field. Don't think you can reach the trenches so easily.」
Ikuta pushed the pieces on the board back to the other side, and narrowed his eyes.
「I will welcome the battle turning into a quagmire. However── That's not what you want, right, Jean?」
「── Maintain the same objective and just change the attack route. 「Don't let the troops take the easiest paths」.」
At the same time, the white-haired officer gave his instructions. Miara enquired his reason.
「Jean, this is…?」
「Can't you see? They predicted our attack path and aimed their cannons there. They already expected us to attack the flanks of the trenches. This means── the seemingly easiest paths to take are the most dangerous.」
He knocked the table with his finger. Miara couldn't imagine how many schemes are churning in Jean's mind right now.
「That might be so, but the battle will get out of hand if this continues.
「Let's change the terrain too」── pull the aiming point of the large cannons further back.」
When they heard the large cannons firing, the soldiers in the fore of the trenches lowered their bodies. However── the explosion of the shell was surprisingly far in front of them.
「…?」 「What? They didn't aim properly?」 「The large cannon shell didn't fly very far…?」
The soldiers raised their heads timidly and frowned. Some of them looked relieved, but that expression vanished the next moment. Because the Kioka soldiers were sprinting for the craters made by that explosion.
「N-No.」「Are they going to──」
The Kioka rushed to the craters before they came under retaliatory fire, and kept their body low in the holes. That kept them safe from any shots from the front. The Imperial Windgunners opened their eyes wide.
「They are using the craters as makeshift trenches…?」
「No way! They changed the terrain from so far away…!」
The Imperials were dumbstruck. The Kioka used a shot from several kilometers away to make a trench they took so much effort and time to dig. As they watched the unreasonableness of their difference in technology, a new crater exploded in front of them.
「Good, run over there!」「It will be safer in the pits…!」

The Kioka troops used this chance to sprint for the holes. Seeing that everyone had entered safely, the Platoon Leader took the lead by taking the shovel off his back.
「Hold your shovels── and get digging!」
Without waiting for his orders, the Kioka troops were already pushing their shovels into the earth.
「... They are digging trenches too?」
Suya observed the enemy during the pause between bombardments.
「They blow a crater with the giant cannon, then send in the troops to dig it further… It's a good tactic. This will minimize casualties and increase work efficiency.」
She analyzed the situation and unconsciously touched the bayonet on her waist… If she had to use this weapon, that would mean the base had fallen. However, Suya also knew that this battle wouldn't end with just that.
「Brace yourselves, everyone── the enemy has closed their distance with us. The battle is going to get harsh.」
As the battle on the frontlines intensifies, the people in the back also get busier. Mobilizing an army of 10,000 requires massive resources and enormous amounts of people to transport them. Just like a waterfowl's feet paddling underwater, war wasn't possible without supplies.
「Good!── Are there any other cargo?」
In one of the villages serving as a midpoint station of the supply line. A petite brown skinned woman stood at the front to direct the transport operations. She was the Shinnack Tribal Chief, Nanak Dar.
「Yes, it's all here!」
「Good, then send it over! Casualties are coming in slowly, so we have to be prepared too!」
With her permission, the fully laden carriage set off. As the Shinnack Tribesmen watched the carriage go, a low thunder-like growl could be heard. They furrowed their brows uneasily.
「... The Blast Cannons can be heard from here? Is this really fine?」
「Since that Ikuta is in command, it will be alright.」
Nanak was the only one who could promise that confidently. The Tribal Chief's unwavering attitude motivated the people, but at this time, a man ran over in a panic. He was Nanak's long time acquaintance, Meliage.
「── Boss! Sorry, but can you come with me!? There's a scuffle between the young ones!」
「I will be right there!」
Nanak immediately got on her way, and followed Meliage to the village's main building. Inside the building, two young people were in each others' faces, ready to fight. Seeing how heated they were, the gutsy woman of the Shinnack Tribe took a deep breath and yelled:
「That's enough! Both of you, stop!」
The two of them froze. Nanak walked up to them briskly and glared at their faces.

「The eastern frontlines have engaged with the Kioka forces. Tell me, why are you quarreling during a time like this?」
She asked them for the reason behind the conflict. One of them said:
「Boss! He was saying nonsense! He said we should turn to Kioka immediately...!」
The crowd behind Nanak started to waver. She was the only one who was unmoved, and smiled boldly.
「That's interesting── is it true?」
She asked the other person. Her calm demeanour made that man hesitate before shouting:
「That's right, I can say it as many times as you want! We shouldn't be helping with the goods transportation here, and surrender to the Kioka Army immediately! For the sake of the Shinnack Tribe's future!」
「Why you… Such drivel!」「Shut your mouth──」
「Wait!」
Nanak stopped her tribe mates sternly from using force, and stared right at that man.
「Let him speak── You mentioned the future of the Shinnack Tribe, right? What do you mean?」
Seeing the Tribal Chief urging him to speak, the man used this chance to rant:
「Isn't it obvious, the Empire won't let us live in peace! They look down on us, and the fields we worked so hard to cultivate are ruined by this war! Isn't it better to go to Kioka!? I know about them! That's a nation made up of many different races, and they won't treat outsiders unkindly! Am I right, Boss?」
The man asked eagerly, but Nanak frowned.
「I did hear about that… But did you forget? We were betrayed by Kioka before. After getting driven out of the mountains by the Church of Aldera Holy Army, I won't work with them again.」
「Are we to continue suffering in the Empire then, Boss? To be scorned by them who mock us as barbarians from the mountains...!」
「Not at all… There are still many issues, but our lives are gradually improving. And we are working hard to improve that too. I don't know who mistreated you, but I won't let others look down on us forever.」
Nanak looked right into his eyes and said. After locking gaze with her for a long while, the man averted his eyes and said quietly:
「... I can't trust you.」
「Why?」
「I can't approve of the hard work you mentioned, Boss… After leaving the mountains, you have been learning the culture and politics of the Empire. And even cosying up to the people in the Capital… You are half Imperial to me now.」
The unexpected retort made Nanak hold her breath. Mileage who was watching on the side couldn't help walking forth.

「You…! You don’t even know who she is doing this for!? And how she feels working so hard all this time—」
His words got cut off by Nanak who reached her right hand out. Nanak took a deep breath to calm herself, and then said:
「You are right… Things will be different from the times we spent on the mountains!」
And so, she shared her feelings after suffering much hardships and defeat before coming here.
「We were chased from the plains to the mountains. And now, we were chased out of the mountains into a corner of the Empire. And you are not comfortable living here… And want to head to Kioka?」
「……」
「I have enough… I don’t know what kind of place Kioka is. However, there is one thing I do know— there are no utopias. Even if we search the entire world, there won’t be a place that will take us in without needing any price, and let us live in peace. If we want to get closer to that goal, the only way is to build a place that belongs to us.」
Nanak told everyone firmly, because she didn’t want the Shinnack Tribe to become nomads wandering the world for a nonexistent promised land.
「It doesn’t matter if you acknowledge it or not, this is the Empire’s land. If we want to live here, how can we ignore the Empire’s customs? We can’t, so I learned those customs. I reflected on my past where I got defeated wielding my blade with brute force, and learned politics, business and law that will be the Shinnack Tribe’s new weapons.」
「…Ugh…」
「— In order to live here, I have changed, and the Shinnack Tribe will also change slowly… There are things that won’t change. Like our dances, rituals, songs, tales and belief in the Sprites… That will still be tied to our souls.」
Nanak patted her chest with a smile.
「Another thing— Most of you are probably worried, but the Empress of this country won’t abandon us easily.」
「… Huh…?」
「Because of various reasons, that Empress detests me, but even so— she didn’t let her personal feelings distract her from her treatment of the Shinnack Tribe. With her status, she could have taken my head whenever she wanted. She had several chances already, but I’m still alive. Don’t you think that’s interesting?」
「……」
「If you lump all the Imperials together, you will miss the interesting people hidden amongst them. You have been in the care of Hanna and Mirtog before, do you hate them? Have they looked down on you or mocked you?」
The man couldn’t answer that question. Their friction with the Imperials might run deep, but the Tetzirich couple was an obvious exception. They toiled in the fields together with the tribesmen, and ate the dishes cooked

from the harvested crops. In the Shinnack Tribe, no one treated the couple as just another Imperial.
"We are at war now, and we are responsible for supporting the troops from the rear. Without the appropriate level of trust, we won't be stationed here. It will be a shame to tread on that trust."
Nanak patted his shoulder with that, then turned to the crowd and announced to her tribemates:
"Alright, if you get it, then go back to work. Transport, nursing and cooking, we will have more work in the future! The more we accomplish, the more stable our position in the Empire. For the future of the Shinnack Tribe, this is the time to lay down a solid foundation!"
The group slowly went back to their stations after hearing that. The young people in the scuffle earlier also followed. A moment later, the man who was facing off against Nanak walked past her as he muttered: "... Sorry, Boss."
"... You actually convinced him. You are incredible, Boss."
Meliage said with an impressed face. Nanak snorted:
"Of course, I also thought about it a lot… If I can only raise my voice on the battlefield like in the past, I won't be able to lead the current Shinnack Tribe."
The moment after she answered, her partner Wind Sprite Shia notified her of a call. Nanak immediately picked up the call from her acquaintance.
"— **Nanak Dar here. What do you want, Empress?**"
"— I'm a bit concerned, so I called you to check."
Being feisty from the get go was the norm with this person. Chamille stated her intent without being fazed, and after a short pause, she got a dubious reply.
"**You are calling personally? What a nosy person. What do you want to know?**"
"I will get right to the point, I want to know the reaction of the Shinnack Tribe… After being forced to abandon the land being cultivated, your group has been forced to accept many demands for strategic reasons. I know people holds a grudge against me, but is there any danger of open rebellion?"
The Empress asked worriedly, and a mischievous voice answered.
"**Your level of comprehension isn't bad. Just moments ago, the young people in the tribe had a scuffle because of this.**"
"...! As expected..."
"**Understandably, everyone was unhappy... By the way, you are worried for nothing. We are not stupid enough to abandon our mission or turn to the enemy over something so trivial.**"
Nanak declared. Chamille felt that she was worrying about nothing, but the other party continued with a gentler tone:
"**But I was hurt by something that was said... Seeing me learn Imperial culture, a young man told me that I'm like half Imperial now.**"

…!
Chamille froze when she heard that. The pain Nanak felt could be heard through her bitter laugh from the Sprite.
What I’m trying to do for the future of the Shinnack Tribe looks like a betrayal to some people— leading a tribe is hard. It’s useless telling you all that though.
The Empress clenched her fists… the person she didn’t really get along with was showing her frail side, so she couldn’t just ignore her. Before Nanak hid her feelings behind her usual strong face, Chamille said:
… No, I understand, Nanak Dar.
Huh?
I said I understand. Since I took the throne, I attempted countless things… and have the same worries.
A silence fell between them. Sensing that she was listening on the other end of the Sprite, Chamille continued:
The right way of ruling might not have the support of the people, and governing in the wrong manner might not be criticized by others. What is right, and what is wrong— we might need centuries to truly understand that. I know that is the norm for politics, but… I just can’t get used to it.
The Empress expressed all the frustrations that had accumulated so far. After a long pause, she got a quiet reply.
… Is that so? You have the same problems?
Nanak muttered at this unexpected revelation— and then laughed out loud.
This might be a folly of the moment— but right now, I want to grab a drink with you.
I feel the same… I will drink with you when I’m allowed to in the future.
Huh? Who needs to grant permission for the Empress to drink?
Nanak asked stiffly. Chamille hesitated a little before answering bashfully:
.. Solork won’t let me drink, he says drinking at my age will hinder my growth. Don’t you think it’s illogical? Even though he drank like a whale when he was younger than me.
She said childishly, and an intense pressure came from the other side of the Sprite.
… You got guts showing off your love life at a time like this.
Huh? S-Showing off my love life?
It’s even more infuriating that you aren’t aware— enough, get back to your work! You don’t need to worry about this place!
Nanak ended the call with that. Chamille stood there in a daze, then turned around when she sensed a presence behind. Vackie was covering her snickering lips behind her.
…! Vackie? When did you—
Since the beginning— Sigh I’m so jealous Aside from me, you have other friends you can quarrel with.

The girl in a white coat said in a feigned tantrum and pouted her lips. Chamille wanted to retort, but since she would get teased no matter what she said, she swallowed her words.
「..... Get back to work.」
「Yes yes yes!」
On the other hand, in the sea southeast of the Empire. The two fleets that had set off from their respective ports could size up their opponents at the same time.
「... Admiral, that's...」
On the Flagship 「Red Dragon」, which was similar in size with the other ships, the adjutant who was watching through his telescope at the front deck said timidly. Admiral Erynphin Jurgus beside him stared right at the enemy, his feet shoulder width apart as he nodded firmly.
「That's right── the opponents we are picking a fight with this time.」
Admiral Jurgus said as he watched the orderly spread out Kioka fleet before him. They had five times the number of ships he saw at Port Nemong, a huge naval force with almost every vessel from the 1st to 4th fleet. Aside from the number of ships obscuring the horizon, there was something that the Imperial sailors feared more.
「... The number of ships is about even on both sides. However...」
「However?」
Admiral Jurgus urged him to continue, but the adjutant was hesitant to speak. He couldn't avoid the truth any further if he said it out loud. After a long silence, he finally said:
「... The enemy fleet is made up entirely of Blast Cannon Ships.」
In the Kioka fleet facing them from the east, on the front deck of the three mast Blast Cannon ship 「White Wings」.
「── This is what I personally think, and instead of being reliable, it's a little embarrassing.」
The Rear Admiral wearing her trademark feather scarf outside her uniform── the「Great Mother of White Wings」Elulufay Tenerexilla, was standing there with a complicated face.
「── Because that's the facts. We had the advantage of using Blast Cannons during the last war, but still lost. With that in mind, how should we prepare for this revenge match?」
She looked around her as she said that. When she turned her eyes away from the Imperial navy she could see the same thing everywhere. The fleet of ships without gunports covered the ocean.
「── More Blast Cannons than last time. If ten isn't enough, then prepare a hundred. If a hundred is too few, then a thousand. Such a childish way of thinking lacks elegance. Don't you think so?」
She expressed her dissatisfaction and grumbled. Greg answered with an awkward smile:
「I can understand how you feel, but in this world, there are overwhelming advantages that are clear even to a child. No matter how the battle plays

out, there can be no results aside from victory. Preparing such a force is an ideal in a strategic sense.
Elulufay nodded reluctantly, as her fearsome looking aide said— it was better to have a higher chance of winning. By fighting with such an advantage, her subordinates were more likely to survive.
In other words, this is a war we can win regardless of who has command— otherwise, this would be troubling. Since the Fleet Admiral this time isn't the Great Mother.
Greg said as he turned his gaze towards the Kioka flag ship to the west of the White Wings. Elulufay looked at the Fleet Admiral from afar, and said with a sigh.
The Admiral of the First Fleet, huh… I don't plan to say anything more at this juncture, but can't Ario choose someone else with his political prowess?
He probably wants to push you into that role, but the defeat at Port Nemong and the two years spent as prisoners of war has its effect. We are lucky that the fourth fleet wasn't dissolved, so we have to accept this fact.
Greg said in resignation. At this moment— he could see see the Great Mother showing an emotion beyond simple dissatisfaction and asked:
… Do you feel uneasy? Do you think we might fail even with these many Blast Cannon ships?
I was confident of victory last time too… I hope I'm just worried over nothing. Even if the possibility is miniscule, what should we do if our advantage is overturned? — Since we have experience fighting them, preparing for this possibility is our job.
… Well said. I don't want to lose to the same opponent twice.
The Great Mother's words made Greg tense up again. At this moment, the sound of a gong entered their ears.
It's starting. If this goes normally, we will achieve an overwhelming victory— will we even have a chance to fight?
If not, we can just sulk in bed. If it comes to that, you can wait in bed for me.
Elulufay answered with a wave of her hand. Interpreting her actions as the signal to war, Greg turned to his men behind him and shouted:
Stay sharp— It's starting!
An intense battle played out on land. After Kioka started digging trenches, the two forces kept getting closer to each other.
You back there, the ammunition supply is too slow! You want to enemy to break through!?
U-Understood!
Suya yelled at the sight of the empty ammo box, and a soldier rushed to the adjacent trench to check for more ammo. A hand from the side placed a fresh box of ammo before her.
Here, use this.
— Major Sarihasrag? And Captain Sushuraf, why are you here?

「My sector got blown to bits, give me some space.」
Sariha and his buffed brother came forth and took the space beside Suya with their Wind Guns in hand. They fought shoulder to shoulder as they conversed.
「It's inevitable that the supplies will be delayed. Some sectors have been cut off by the explosions. It will still be fine for the moment── but it's time to withdraw our defences.」
「... We can still fight. Keeping the future in mind, we have to make them waste as much munitions here as possible.」
「Of course you can go on── Woah!」
Seizing the gap when the return fire stopped, the Kioka soldiers charged out of their trenches. Sariha's group didn't miss this chance to open fire, shooting down the soldiers leading the charge, and stubbornly stopping the invasion attempt. Sariha fed a new bullet to his Sprite and continued:
「── With how close they are, one mistake and our defence line will fall. We can't fight such a risky battle for long, you do know that, right?」
Suya bit her lips hard when she heard that. Her past mistake was haunting her, and she nodded with a stern face.
「... You are right.」
「I suggest that we start the retreat, Brother.」
Sensing his elder brother's intention, Sushuraf was about to make a call. But before he could do that, their Sprites started to speak.
「── This is Ikuta Solork. Everyone in the frontlines, we are almost reaching the limit, right?」
The young Field Marshal said as if he was seeing this with his own eyes. He then ordered without any hint of regret:
「We will begin our withdrawal according to the plan. We still have ample time, so don't rush your retreat and give the plan away to the enemy.」
Sariha, Sushuraf and Suya looked at each other and nodded. Ikuta continued:
「Don't get hurt── After all, this is just the start of the war.」
On the fifth evening since the battle started, Major Mazeya felt something was strange as he looked at the enemy base.
「...?.....?」
「Why are you staring at the enemy camp like that?」
When Colonel Gatra asked, his adjutant answered hesitantly:
「... I might be thinking too much, but the enemy's retaliatory fire seems to be weakening.」
「Hmm? This is normal, since they are under prolonged bombardment.」
「No, not that... There seems to be a lot less enemy soldiers...」
Sensing that he shouldn't ignore this, Colonel Gatra immediately contacted headquarters. He received an order right after making his report.
「── **Attack immediately!**」
「Huh...?」

「Send the troops into the enemy trenches. They are retreating, so there won't be fierce resistance!」

The puzzled Colonel Gatra carried out Jean's orders. The troops digging their trenches were shocked by this sudden instruction, and when they braced themselves and charged into the enemy camp, they found the place deserted.

「T-The enemy's gone?」 「They must have retreated!」

「That's impossible! We have air troopers watching them! Even if it's the evening, we should be able to see a large number of soldiers leaving the trenches from the sky…!」

What kind of sorcery could make a ten thousand army disappear? It would be quite some time before they uncover the means──

「… Ughh… A-Are we there yet?」

「We're almost there. Don't be anxious, you will block the people behind if you fall.」

At the same time. The Imperial soldiers fleeing in a single file through a dark and cramped passageway..

「── After trenches, it's tunnels, huh? How gloomy.」

Sariha grumbled in the darkness. Suya walking ahead of him answered coldly:

「If you want to become a pincushion in an open space, please go that way.」

「Hah! Don't kid with me, I can pretend to be moles or anything if I can survive.」

They chatted as they advanced. They felt a breeze ahead, and soon left the long tunnel and returned into the open sky. Sariha dusted himself off, and looked at his men standing by near the exit.

「── Is that everyone? We are the last unit out of the tunnel, right?」

「Yes, big brother.」

Sushuraf who followed him out of the tunnel nodded firmly. Suya secretly sighed in relief when she saw his figure. She was worried about his buff body getting stuck in the tunnel.

「Good, seal the exit. Get it done quickly so we can withdraw.」

After confirming everyone was out, Sariha ordered his men to seal the tunnel. After pushing aside the wood frame supporting the tunnel and pushing the top with shovels, the tunnel collapsed. Since it would be faster to travel overground then to dig out the tunnel again, there was no danger of the enemy following right after them.

「It will take time for the cavalry to cross the trenches, so we just need to shake off their infantry.」

「Is the stamina of the men alright?」

「It's fine, thanks to you forcing them to march at a ludicrous pace during training── we are going to run.」

The three nodded at each other, then led their troops on a run under the cover of night. They were long gone by the time the Kioka forces reached this place.

□── Not suitable for pursuit battles. It’s obvious, but that’s the flaw of the Blast Cannons.□
In the headquarters of the Imperial Central Base, Ikuta received a report that the withdrawal was a success shortly after ordering the retreat.
□It’s obvious that we retreated while conserving our forces, so you won’t do something as risky as pursuing with infantry, right? Even if you do, we will just take you on.□
Retreating with your back to the enemy was a high risk military maneuver. Withdrawing successfully against the Kioka forces led by Jean Arkinex showed the genius of Ikuta Solork’s strategy. Digging a tunnel ahead of time, choosing the evening when it was hard to see the movements of the soldier, and the troops retreating orderly starting from the rear in secret── if they miss one of these conditions, things wouldn’t progress so smoothly.
□Unlike a fort, there’s nothing to be happy about capturing trenches. It looks unimpressive, and can’t be used for anything else. It will hinder the passage of the Blast Cannons and cavalry… In other words, we don’t have to defend it stubbornly. It’s just a chokepoint built on the assumption that it would be captured.□
Unlike fortresses built with a high level of construction skills, there wasn’t much need for special techniques in digging trenches. If the soldiers and civilians work together, they could prepare many entrenched bases for this final battle. This policy could only work after they completely cut off their reliance on fortresses.
□Go deeper, Jean── This swamp is much more deeper.□
□── It’s like I’m being lured into a swamp.□
On the other hand, Jean had accurately read his opponent’s intention. He looked at the map laid out on the table with a snort.
□There must be more choke points ahead, huh… They would force us to waste our shells, then withdraw from the trenches before they suffer heavy losses. Exhausting us by repeating these steps… That’s the basic tactic of the Imperial army.□
Miara beside him nodded nervously. Leaving Jean aside, she never expected the opening battle to end like this… They broke through the entrenched base and took one step closer to victory, but the Imperial forces didn’t suffer much losses. There were no reasons to assume that future battles would get easier. However, the eyes of the □Insomniac Brilliant General□ didn’t waver.
□But, you get it right, Solork? There is more than one path── for your strategy to be valid, you have to destroy all our alternative routes.□
Jean said with a low voice… Considering the capability of both sides, half of the development so far was as expected of an opening battle. The war that would be getting more complicated in the future was the main event for him and Ikuta.
□It’s your time to go── Move out, Harrah.□
□── Yes, got it, Boss.□

Taznyado Harrah received the instruction of his ally through his Sprite. Beside his buffed body, the petite Sergeant Major Mita Kenshi leaned forth.
「It’s finally time to go. What should we do, Blockhead?」
「Send out the advance party first, and find out the location of the enemy’s defences. Match the intel against the map to find out the feasibility of going around them, then move the main forces.」
Harrah said as he laid out a map. He knew what Jean needed very well. Do whatever he could to flank the Imperial forces and attack their rear. Harrah had to act like Jean’s eyes and hands to realize Jean’s strategy precisely.
「Even if there isn’t a path, we still have to break through── I’m counting on you, Phantoms.」
After handing the map to Sergeant Major Mita, he turned to his back. Dark figures were lining up in the pitch darkness.
「── The first defensive line has been breached. The enemy is coming, Brigadier General Sazarf!」
Tens of kilometers to the west of the trenches that had fulfilled its role, on the Kioka army predicted route. Inside the headquarters tent of the defensive blockade, Melza shouted after receiving that report, and Sazarf scratched the back of his head when he heard that.
「I was hoping they wouldn’t come, but the enemy isn't naive enough to go back if we ask nicely… All units, get ready to engage!」
The officers rushed out of the tent after receiving their orders, and the troops slid into their trenches on their officers’ orders. The basic tactic was the same here, they would make full use of the trenches and retreat at its limit to exhaust the Kioka forces.
「I want to hold the line for 5… no 6 days. The other places won’t get broken through before us… Hmm?」
When Sazarf was muttering to himself about his prediction of the future, his partner notified him about a call from the Field Marshal. He answered immediately:
「Yes, this is Senpa Sazarf. My unit is getting ready to engage the enemy, do you have any urgent──」
「Nothing much. Hey, how are things with Lieutenant Colonel Melza?」
Sazarf who was answering seriously almost lost his balance. He stopped himself from falling, then held the Sprite with both hands and yelled:
「Why you…! You are asking that now? Think about the timing!」
「No no, timing doesn’t matter when talking about such things. So I will give you some advice as a Scientist. Do you know that if you smoke too much, the girl might hate kissing.」
「I’m so moved by your advice! And I just switched the brand of my cigarettes on your previous advice too!」
Sazarf retorted── he then sensed that Ikuta’s jesting had a different air than usual, and asked with a serious attitude:
「… What, are you still bothered about what happened before?」
The silence made Sazarf realized that he was right.

□... How troubling of you to display your excellent observation skill here.□
□Of course I will notice, we have known each other for so long. Let me say this first, I'm not bothered about it at all. I want to apologize for making you worry instead.□
Their feelings reverted from Field Marshal and Brigadier General to their personal relationship, and Sazarf apologized.
□What a pain… I want to act like an elder before you, but you surpassed me and became the Field Marshal. I even troubled you with my wilful words. Why am I so lame?□
The moment he said that, Sazarf could sense Ikuta smiling through the Sprite.
□I never thought you are lame, Captain Sazarf.□
□... Like I said, I do have such a side to me.□
Sazarf couldn't help smiling wryly── the small grudge in a corner of his heart had completely vanished. Ikuta paused and gave a last bit of encouragement:
□I will leave the defence to you. Don't push yourself.□
□Yes, leave it to me.□
Sazarf ended the call after giving a firm promise. Melza who was listening beside him smiled.
□── The Field Marshal is unexpectedly delicate.□
□No… He has always been like that. He is very sensitive about the feelings of others.□
Sazarf reflected that him not being reliable enough was to be blamed too. Seeing Sazarf's strong bond with the young Field Marshal, Melza said quietly:
□... I'm a little jealous.□
□Huh?□
□It's nothing── get ready to engage!□
Melza pulled herself together and observed the defences. Sazarf □□ considered the problems she raised, and made preparations for the looming battle against the Kioka forces.
The Kioka forces that broke through the trenches waited until dawn to send out light cavalry as scouts on Harrah's orders. But these first steps to prepare for an attack were filled with troubles.
□──! Enemy cavalry sighted! We are on a collision course!□
The Kioka cavalry was riding along the roads on either side of a slope, and one of the riders warned after spotting signs of enemy horsemen. Their captain grimaced.
□Enemy guerilla…? But we will be attacked one sidedly if we stop! Defeat them! Draw your blades!□
The riders drew their weapons. They were highly trained Kioka cavalry, and were confident that they wouldn't lose easily against other horsemen── they spurred their mounts forth, and closed with the enemy in no time──
□── Ughh──?□

A few seconds before both sides would clash, they could see enemy soldiers charging down the slopes.
「What――A-Ambush form the cliff――!」
Shouts echoed immediately, but they were engaged with the enemy when the news had spread. The two units clashed at equal speed, but the surprise attack broke the Kioka's formation. After losing their momentum, the Kioka cavalry was scattered by the attack.
「――Seh!」
The red haired rider on the battlefield plunged the Kioka soldiers into deeper despair. A saber cut their necks in an instant, his intimidating swordsmanship brought them death even from horseback.
「Uwahh――Kyaaa!」
Their chain of command was severed from the first attack, and the Imperial horsemen relentlessly assaulted the enemy staying stiffly in place. It didn't take long before they were annihilated.
「Enemy advance unit, annihilated―― recover the wounded and form up.」
Solvenares Igsem's voice echoed out. The cavalry reformed on his orders, and a woman cheered softly.
「... G-Great! I'm alive! I survive!」
「You took down one of the riders.」 「First Lieutenant Nei is suited for the frontlines.」
Her comrades beside her nodded with a smile. The fierce gaze of the vermillion haired general fell on them.
「Cut the chatter, prepare for the next battle―― If the enemy scouts fail to bring back intel, we can delay their invasion. Buying more time will be beneficial to our side.」
The cavalry started advancing again after hearing that. First Lieutenant Niam Nei who was riding behind the vermillion haired general asked timidly:
「E=Erm」 Captain… How many more times will we be doing this?」
「Ask the enemy.」
He answered curtly. Niam held the reins with one hand, and pressed the corner of her eye with the other.
「... I want to cry.」
「Cheer up, First Lieutenant Nei!――If we die, let's play together in heaven!」
「Shut up, retard! Who's dying!」
She didn't back down, retorting with a curse instead. The guerilla unit galloped in the fresh dawn air towards the next battle.
At the same time. A war was happening in a seemingly unrelated place.
「... Ugh...!」
Before the Phantoms that passed through the dark forest, a bullet bounced off the bark of a tree. They quickly jumped into the bushes to take cover, and clicked their tongue because of the situation they were in.
「I never thought they would deploy troops in a forest like this… Have they seen through what we are thinking?」

「Captain, let’s retreat. There must be a different route.」
Phantom nodded at each other before turning back. However── the moment they turned to leave, the point man’s feet sunk into the ground.
「── Uwah?」
「What happened!」
The Phantoms rushed to their comrade, and found that feet caught in barbed spikes. The Phantom couldn’t help groaning in pain.
「U-Ughh...!」
「This is… a trap?」
「... How is that possible. What kind of logic are they using to read our movements?」
The Phantom muttered in fear. In the forest they were traversing to flank the enemy, their opponent predicted that and took countermeasures. The fear of being read made them search for the enemy with bated breath in the darkness.
「── Ughh!」
When a soldier stopped to help his comrade who was trapped, a shot landed right on his leg. Torway was on a cliff facing the forest, and had taken out more than ten enemies from that position.
「Phantoms tread on paths that others wouldn’t take… And we hunters will stop them.」

He muttered quietly— and of course, he wasn't the only one hiding in the darkness. On the thick branches, on the ground, or in the bushes, his snipers were spread out to support each other.
「Traps laid in the dim forest, and soldiers concealing themselves snipe at each other… How arduous and treacherous. It's like you said, Yatori-san. The battlefield is turning into a despicable place.」
There was a hint of self mockery on the youth's lips, but it was gone in an instant.
「I will guide the forefront of warfare to this stage. And that's why, this darkness is the world of Torway Remeon.
Don't worry, Ik-kun. I won't lose to anyone again.」
He buried his firm determination deep into his heart. The youth found a new prey and squeezed the trigger.
In the Imperial base defending a route further to the north. After an intense battle in the day, dusk was coming.
「... The sun is setting already? It's getting dark.」
「The enemy is right before us, don't let your guard down. This will be a long night...」
The soldiers talked quietly in the trenches. They were exposed to intense nervousness for the entire day, and at that moment, they heard their comrade calling from behind.
「Hey, time to change shifts. You guys go rest in the back.」
「Ehh—?」「Changing shift? That's great, but...」
The troops who were expected to continue with their work looked surprised. Their comrade shook their head when they saw that.
「You might not notice because of the excitement, but you are actually tired. It will be troubling if you force yourself and collapse. We still need you to perform in the future—」
Sounds of cannons came from the distance like a thunder from far away. Many soldiers lying in their tents were distracted by that sound, and couldn't sleep despite their fatigue.
「... The sound of cannons even reached here.」「... Can we even sleep properly...?」
The soldiers tossed and turned in bed. The bed was relatively wide and comfortable, but they were still troubled since they couldn't sleep. However, several medics soon came to check on the frowning soldiers.
「Here, ear plugs. It's small, so don't lose them.」
They gave soldiers who couldn't sleep a pair of ear plugs made from corks. The soldiers didn't expect this and opened their eyes wide.
「T-They are well prepared.」
「It's pointless if your rest is disturbed by noise. Those suffering from minor bruises, please don't endure it and raise your hands. It's our job to ensure you have a good sleep and return to the battlefield full of energy.」
The medic said with a grin. After taking care of their comrades who couldn't sleep, they quietly left the tents and walked to the cooking facilities nearby.

「Cooking team, are you working on supper? Please work hard, we won't have the strength to fight after eating nasty food.」
「Leave it to us. I'm a veteran who cooked in the army for ten years. With all the crockeries I'm given, I can cook dishes on the same level of the mess on base here.」
The army cook declared as he stirred the pot with a long ladle. Drawn by the fragrance from the pot, the hungry soldiers sauntered over.
At the same time. In a room not far from Ikuta's commander's office, the medics deployed in the various camps made their reports.
「── Good, this will be fine. Rotate the personnel frequently, and don't push the soldiers too much.」
Haro was checking the situation from the reports sent by the Sprites. *Are the soldiers resting properly? Are they eating well? Are their mental states stable?*
If she senses any signs of danger from the reports, she would give the proper instructions. That was the mission she had in this final battle.
「The tent is stuffy and hard to sleep in, so please ventilate them with Wind Sprites. The air will flow by putting a Wind Sprite at the entrance and the exit. Explain to the soldiers that this would be more comfortable than going out to catch a breeze. As for the people in pain because of their wounds──」
Haro sat before her desk and concentrated on communication. At this moment── a blonde girl stood behind her, near the door.
「...Haro, how's the situation at the rear?」
「Yes, Your Majesty. The training is paying off, and the troops are working as instructed. Our ability to fight over protracted periods have improved.」
Haro turned to the Empress and said after she ended the call. Chamille nodded.
「Ikuta doctrine, huh? ...Compared to having more Blast Cannons and balloons, this is the biggest revolution of the Imperial army.」
Before the final battle with Kioka, the dark-haired youth made the position of the Imperial army clear with his words. That became rules commonly known as Ikuta doctrine, which fundamentally changed how manpower was used in an army.
For example, instead of holding a defence base, the survival of the personnel was prioritized. Or stopping the use of a unit that had reached a certain degree of exhaustion. It completely ignored the use and dispose mindset in warfare, and maximized the continued usage of the Imperial Army as an organization. It inherits the ideal Bada Sankrei used on his regiment, and expands further on it.
「... Amazing. The right way of slacking and the correct way of working are the same thing. The idea Ikuta-san is always talking about has finally spread to the entire army. Adequate meals and adequate rest. By guaranteeing these two things, the soldiers can keep fighting without draining their body and mind. The longer the war, the greater its effect.」
「Yes── that's true.」

Chamille concurred unreservedly. At this moment, the Sprite on the table sent a new message. Before she disturb Haro's work, the Empress started to leave.

「I'm heading back to the capital, I have to take in the refugees chased here by the Kioka army… I will leave the rest to you.」

Chamille left after saying that. Haro watched her leave with a salute, then took the call.

「... Alright then. With the enemy splitting up, the number of battlefields have increased drastically.」

On the other hand, the Imperial army headquarters. The dark-haired youth stood before the map with the pieces representing the enemy and his allies, and thought.

「There are no dangers anywhere for now. The risk is high during retreats, so I will keep the channel open and give the order when the time comes… So the problem is the timing, huh? It's difficult for the defence line to retreat naturally at the same pace.」

He muttered with a grunt— it was clear from his opening battle that he didn't plan to defeat the Kioka forces with just one battle. He would exhaust the enemy as much as possible by bolstering the defences, then withdraw to the next base before the base reached its limit. He would repeat these steps and wait for the opponent to give up. The winning condition for the Kioka forces was to capture the capital, while the Imperial army's winning condition was to stop them and defend their nation.

It might sound simple, but executing it was difficult. If the enemy broke through one of the many paths, they would flank around to the back of the other paths… Most importantly, one mistake during the retreating action would result in serious losses. The retreat of all the defence lines needed to be maintained at the same pace. Even with Ikuta's command ability and the Sprites communication, this was still a risky tightwire walk.

As he was thinking of the development several steps ahead, Kusu notified him of an incoming call from Admiral Erynphin Jurgus. Ikuta stopped his train of thought and answered immediately:

「Hello, Ikuta Solork here. How's the sea battle?」

Ikuta asked right off the bat. The noise from the other side was mixed into the call. He immediately understood that they were in the middle of a naval battle.

After a few seconds of silence, a voice that was heavier than ever answered through the Sprite:

「— Sorry, we lost.」

「── The front deck got hit! Eight casualties!」「Have we retrieved the injured yet!? Medic」!」

「The upper mast is damaged! We are losing speed!」 「Get it changed right now! We are doomed if we stop!」
The sailors yelled nonstop on the ships. The anxiety of the sails operator, the moan of the injured, and the Kioka Blast Cannon ships floating a fair distance away── All this chaos turned into the air of the battlefield.
「… Admiral Sir…」
Since the battle started, the communication officer working as an adjutant turned paler with each passing moment. Even Admiral Jurgus was showing a rare frown. As he watched the naval battle against the enemy, his bitter emotions kept accumulating between his brows.
「… Connect me to the Field Marshal.」
The Boss of the Pirate Navy took out his Sprite from his pouch and said. The call got through in no time.
「Ikuta Solork speaking. How goes the naval battle?」
「── Sorry, we lost.」
He reported the situation quickly. He could feel Ikuta gasping on the other side of the Sprite. Those words were enough to convey the state of events, but as the leader of the navy, the Admiral had to fulfil his duties, so he continued:
「── Twelve sunk, Twenty seven unable to sail, fifty two damaged. Even the flagship got hit, the fleet is half ruined.」
These numbers showed the damage incurred mercilessly. It showed the state they were in, and how badly the Imperial fleet was hit by the overwhelming number of Blast Cannon Ships.
「… What about the enemy fleet?」
「They didn’t lose any ships. Some ships have damages to their decks and sails. Compared to us, that’s as good as bug bites… We can’t do anything. We can’t even get near them, this isn’t something we can resolve with outstanding ship maneuvering. We can’t handle an entire fleet of Blast Cannon ships.」
Admiral Jurgus paused there, then swallowed all the emotions in his chest before saying:
「It’s a shame, but we can’t fight in that ocean anymore. I propose a temporary retreat with the surviving ships. In short, run away── What do you think, Field Marshal Sir.」
That was more of a confirmation than a question. He didn’t have to wait long for an answer.
「Permission granted. Retreat immediately, Admiral Jurgus.」
「Understood.」
After getting permission, Admiral Jurgus ended the call. He muttered in front of his adjutant who had a pained expression.
「… After the Igsem… Is this the changing of the times?」

He clenched his fists so hard that the bones started to creak. With the advent of new technology, war has become unrecognizable. He thought about himself who was tossed around by this turbulent flow.
「Are you kidding me? ―I won't succumb to this.」
「― My worries are unfounded after all.」
In a corner of the Kioka fleet that was continuously firing their cannons, on the 「White Wings」. Seeing the half destroyed Imperial Navy, Marine Commander Greg said without any emotions:
「This was the expected result... Unlike the land, there are no trenches to hide in the open sea. With two fleets fighting each other, the number of cannons was the decisive factor in capabilities. The battle was decided before it started.」
This was a clear and obvious reason for victory. After hearing that, Elulufay standing before him said quietly:
「― How vexing.」
「Great Mother...」
「This is the victory of Kioka's technology, earned by this fleet. However, we have not avenged our last defeat. This victory is nothing to be proud of.」
The 「Great Mother of White Wings」 shared her sincere thoughts… After the battle started, the Kioka fleet kept their distance and shot their cannons, giving no time for the fleet to compete in their sailing abilities. It was a fact that was clear even to a child, the side with better weapons would win― that was all.
Elulufay fell into an unhappy silence. Greg who was watching the enemy movements behind him was the first to see some changes in their movements.
「The enemy is retreating― they don't intend to surrender. Let's give chase, Great Mother.」
Greg said plainly, gently placing his hands on the Great Mother's shoulders from behind. The fearsome looking Marine Commander's concern made Elulufay nod with a deep sigh.
「... How annoying. Looks like the defeat at Port Nemong will be forever buried deep in my breasts.」
She said and then issued a pursuit order to her subordinates. She glanced upwards, and saw her beloved bird Misai staying motionlessly on the bridge, as if it understood that its master didn't require its assistance.
「In hindsight, this is too easy― it's over. The Empire has lost this war.」
「...」
「...Ikuta-san...」
A heavy silence hung in the air. Haro who came to make her operation report saw the sullen figure of the young Commander-in-Chief after receiving the grave news from the sea.
「... I'm fine. But don't let the troops on land know about this.」
「Of course, but...」

Haro had no words── the naval defeat wouldn't end with just that. Losing in the sea meant losing control over the sea, allowing them to transport reinforcements. With the army being pushed to the brink with just the attacks from the east, what would happen if an army landed to the south? ──it's dubious whether they could even fight on two fronts.

Before Haro who was staring at him, the youth who understood this better than anyone shook his head with a bitter smile── as if to say that he knew from the beginning that this wouldn't be an easy war.

「…Haro, it's about time for you to head to the frontlines. I hope you can feel it in person, since calls alone aren't enough to accurately gauge the mental state of the troops.」

「If that is your order… But I'm a little worried about you.」

「Don't worry. Your hug is still showing its effect.」

The youth said with a grin, then added as if he just thought of something:

「Oh right── can you make me a cup of tea?」

「──Yes! I will make a pot of delicious tea!」

Haro tried to answer cheerfully, then ran out of the headquarters.

Maintaining his postures of having both hands behind his back, Ikuta wondered whether he had hid his trembling hands from her.

「… It's fine to tremble, but don't ever panic.」

He persuaded himself with a mumble, and spent several minutes trying to stop his shivering hands. He looked at the pocket watch on the table and realized── he had been commanding the war for 40 consecutive hours after waking up.

「… No good, we can't win if I neglect that.」

Ikuta cautioned himself and pressed the bell to call for Major Megu. Less than 30 seconds later, his familiar adjutant rushed over.

「── Field Marshal, did you call for me!?」

「Yes, I will be sleeping for two hours. During this time, the three of you will handle the calls. The basic plan is to follow the doctrines, only call me if there is an emergency.」

「I understand, please have a good rest.」

The youth walked to the break room next door after leaving these instructions, and Major Megu watched him go with a salute. After going into that room, Ikuta laid down on a bed nearby.

「What a good bed── Hey Jean, it's during times like this that I should treasure the things I have but you don't.」

He closed his eyes with a mutter, and started to snore in less than 10 seconds.

Chapter 2: Mainland Invasion

Normal and special activities filled their days, but people still carried on with their lives during war. It was the same for the Imperial Capital Banhataal far from the frontlines, and in contrast to the precarious war, the market was crowded with people searching for food and daily necessities.
…Let me see the wheat.
An elderly man said in front of a stall, and reached into the basket of wheat. The stallowner was surprised, but his face changed after seeing who it was.
Oh, it's you, Bhada-san. What brings an esteemed person like you to the market?
I'm checking the market prices. In times like this, it's normal for the flow of goods to be disrupted due to the demands of war, however…
Bhada answered as he inspected the wheat in his palm. After checking the first handful, he dug another handful from the bottom of the basket. Normal people would get chased out for doing this— but no merchants in the capital would dare do that to the wealthy merchant known as the Godfather of the Market.
… This price without mixing anything in? Seems adequate. I thought the price will raise higher.
Her Majesty seemed to have stocked up on supplies ahead of time.
I know, I was asked to assist too… I thought it would be a futile effort, but it's going well. At the very least, the preparations are done very well for this war.
Bhada said and increased his evaluation of the Empress' governance. The stallowner shifted his bags of wheat with a wry smile.
With this final battle, the grudge between Kioka and us would finally come to an end. Everyone is looking forward to it.
… How carefree. Have you never thought about what will happen if we lose the war?
Lose? The Imperial Army? Haha— impossible, something so ludicrous won't happen.
The stallowner stated his optimistic view on reflex. After inspecting the wheat, Bhada bid farewell before leaving. With the noise of the market all around him, he snorted.

「He is so unconcerned even at this juncture? … The Empress sure has it hard. Although I'm in no position to say that.」
The man muttered. Unlike most of the people here, he wasn't optimistic about the war── in the past century, Kioka was obviously building up its strength. They challenged this final battle with the confidence of achieving victory.
The men he sent to check the situation at the frontlines would return in a few days. Depending on their reports, things might get busy── When Bhada was walking while thinking about that, a familiar slender figure appeared before him.
「── That's...」
The man watched the bustling crowd in the noon market as if he was looking at livestock.
「Fufufu── it's still as unpleasant as ever .」
Trisnai said with a condescending face. He even hated breathing the air of mere mortals.
「No matter where I look, there're only fools, fools, and more fools. Not one person with normal wit. But that can't be helped. They are fools that need to be guided.」
That's right, the man was looking down on them. He held no expectations for most of the citizens in this country from the start. He had absolute trust in the Empress, which meant he was thoroughly disappointed in the masses.
「But to form a Parliament at this juncture── Your Majesty, just what do you expect from them? The masses that will gather if you scatter bait, like street cats or dogs.」
Trisnai asked his monarch who wasn't here with a sigh.
「Is this a form of love by a monarch? … Emperor Arshankrut──」
「── What are you trying to do by adopting this deformed child?」
A man and a woman looked down at him with emotionless eyes. That was his first memory.
「Don't say that. He isn't just a deformed child── but a deformed child with excellent pedigree. If you raised him and teach him to have a glib tongue, there will be no better tool than him if you want to curry favour with the Imperial family.」
The man said and then drank from his beer bottle. Exposed to the unpleasant scent of alcohol, the baby started crying. The woman frowned while the man covered the mouth of the baby.
「I will think of a name later. Hey, deformed kid, take us to the peak of this country. This is the natural reward we deserved by saving your life from execution, right?」
His young mind understood. To them, no matter what happens, he was just an object.
After he grew a little older, his 「education」 began. The man summoned him to a room, then tossed a strangely shaped inner shirt to him.

「Use this to hide the concave part of your chest. Don't let others see something so unsightly.」
He put on the inner shirt as told. The constrictive feeling on his chest was uncomfortable, but he would just get beaten if he said that. He already grasped the rule of this place.
「Learning History and Mathematics are a given. And Poetry, Music and Divination? I don't know what his Majesty prefers, but it's better to have more weapons.」
The man wasn't the productive type of person, but he was great at sucking up to those in power. Because that was how this married couple had always lived.
「Your brain isn't deformed too, right? There's nothing more boring than that.」
The man crudely grabbed the head sitting by the table. The boy instinctively felt that if the 「education」 didn't meet the man's expectations, his face would be slammed onto the table.
He was literally betting his life to challenge mathematics for the first time in his life. The man's tutelage was crude, but the boy made it up with his intelligence, and met the man's expectations. The man grinned.
「Hah, your memory isn't bad, cocky brat. Or you are just doing this desperately…? Never mind, I will let you eat today.」
After that, they would repeat this process every day. In order to eat, not get beaten, and to survive, he completed the work given to him. He would get hit if he made any mistakes, and he would often be forbidden to eat. But he survived. Contrary to the Imperial doctor's diagnosis that he would be short-lived, the boy possessed unusual tenacity.
「What, you want to try drawing? ──Haha, are you retarded? You think I'm your father?」
When he could complete his work steadily, he tried stating his interest when the man was in a good mood── and got beaten so badly that he was bedridden for three days. This shattered any expectation he had of that man, and the delusion that the man would love him if he continued to answer the man's demand.
The man would occasionally bring the boy to the palace and tell him the same thing:
「Look, your real parents are there, but they would never recognize you as their son. To the Imperial family, the existence of a deformed child like you is a sin itself.」
The man told the boy his history, and his inevitable fate. He fed poison to the boy who was still forming his personality, telling him that he shouldn't be born in the first place.
「However, you have one possibility. That is to infiltrate into the palace by working as an admin officer. If the Imperial family takes a liking to you, they might keep you by their side. Instead of His Majesty, the heir to the

throne— your older brother is closer in age to you, which gives you a better chance.」
He stared at the palace as he listened. This was the sacred ground where the Imperial family resided. Compared to his environment, that was as beautiful as a different world.
He yearned desperately— he wanted to return to that place, to his real family.
「I will make the arrangement before the meeting, you have to sell yourself hard. If he ignores you— I will get really drunk tonight.」
He understood with an emotionless face. That wasn't a metaphor, if he failed, this would be the last day of his life.
On a certain day when he was 16, the chance to decide his fate came.
「— A new face huh, who are you?」
The man made the arrangement for him to take up a posting, and he stepped into the palace for the first time in his life. The other admin officers brought him to meet the Prince, and the Prince looked at him with a displeased face.
「The son of the Izanma house? That scum house grabbed an admin officer posting? Hah, another waste of tax money.」
After learning about his history, the Prince said with disgust before looking away. Even though he was insulted, he didn't feel unhappy, since he agreed with the part about the house being scum.
「Never mind, I know your intentions. You want to curry favour and leech off me, right? Vulgar people with no loyalty towards the Imperial family.」
The Prince looked at the admin officers with a malicious smile— he then swung his hand and hit a large decorative pot. Before the admin officers could even react, the pot shattered and spilled all over the place.
「Oh no— it got smashed. I don't know the reason, but I heard it's a treasure from the warring era. What will I do if my father learns about this.」
The Prince snickered and intentionally said that. He turned to the panicking admin officer and continued:
「As you can see, I need help right now— which one of you can take the fall for me, and say you broke it?」
A heavy silence hung over the air. Seeing his vassals standing pale faced in a row before him, the Prince couldn't help laughing.
「Fuhaha— all of you have good eyes in appraising art! You don't want to shoulder a debt that will bankrupt your house! How honest!」
Prince said, as if he expected this reaction. At this moment— he took a step forward from the group of admin officers.
「Your Highness, I'm the one who broke it.」
The Prince stopped laughing when he heard that, and looked at that man.
「— Say that again.」
「I'm the one who broke it. My deep apologies, I just joined recently and got careless.」

He apologized without any hesitation. The Prince clicked his tongue and leaned forward.
「You are too dumb to calculate this, and still took up this posting? Don't you know how much this pot cost――」
「Please don't move!」
The instant the Prince stepped forward, he yelled to stop the Prince. When the Prince stop on reflex, he continued with a plea:
「Please don't move, Your Highness. The shattered pieces will cut through your shoe sole and hurt your feet. I will clean this up immediately, please bear with it.」
He said and knelt down to collect the pieces. However―― the Prince stepped forth heavily before him.
「... I refuse. Why should I listen to you and stay there.」
「... Must you walk forth no matter what?」
He looked up into the Prince's eyes, and found an emotion that was either confusion or rage wavering in the Prince's eyes.
「That's right, I want to walk. I won't permit there to be any place in this country that I can't walk on. Such a place shouldn't exist―― Since I will inherit the Empire one day, isn't that right?」
The Prince said as if to measure his worth. He nodded in agreement without any hesitation.
「It's as you say. Well then―― please pardon me and use this instead.」
He lowered his body and laid onto the floor on top of the shattered pot. The Prince furrowed his brows puzzledly.
「... What is this?」
「There are still broken pieces on the floor, and it's still too dangerous with just a layer of cloth. I will be the road―― please allow the other admin officer to assist you and walk over me.」
After being glared by him, the admin officers rushed to either side of the Prince. The Prince looked at him emotionlessly as he prepared to become the 「road」.
「... Are you mad?」
「If you need me to, I can be the road for you. This is my duty as your vassal that takes priority over my duty as a bureaucrat.」
There wasn't any gloom in his reply. Shortly after―― the Prince slowly stepped on his back.
「... It's hard to walk. What an uneven road, even a muddy path is better than this.」
「Yes, my deep apologies.」
The shattered pieces under his body cut through his clothes and pierced into his body. But he didn't cry out in pain even once, playing the role of a 「road」 until the Prince finished walking.
「Enough―― stand up.」
The Prince walked off his back and ordered. He stood up with blood all over his admin officer uniform, and the Prince asked:

「What's your name?」
「Your Highness Arshankrut, I'm Trisnai Izanma.」
He eagerly gave his name. The Prince snorted before turning to leave.
「... If I'm in the mood, I will get you to be the road again, Trisnai.」
「It will be my honour.」
When he heard the Prince call him, a warmth spread in his chest. He decided naturally to devote his life to that esteemed man.
「You lot clean this up── oh right, don't bother picking up the pieces and sticking them together. That's just a fake pot I made on the spur of the moment.」
The Prince left after saying that impatiently. Ignoring the stunned admin officers, he kept thinking about the Prince's voice calling his name.
「──There are many people trying to suck up to me, and that's fine. But those guys seems to think about the lower half of my body.」
After the pot incident, the Prince would chat with him from time to time── two years after taking up the posting, the Prince kept him by his side as a conversational partner.
「They keep sending me woman, woman and woman. And give them the unnecessary title of the top beauty of the western territories or the rebirth of an ancient princess── I do like pretty girls, but the never ending train of women is still infuriating. Who do they think I am, a stud horse?」
With his position as an Imperial Prince, he had tons of complaints he couldn't vent to others. Trisnai took on the role of a listener, and the Prince accepted that fact. The Prince probably didn't care whether Trisnai had any schemes.
「Recently, I find literature and art to be interesting. I especially like the palace works of art from a century ago. The techniques might be poor compared to modern works── but their respect towards the Imperial family is more pure and simple, don't you think?」
When he wasn't complaining, the Prince would get chatty when he talks about his interest. He would work on his own art from time to time, and even amateurs would find the standards to be high── he was especially passionate when talking about historical works in the palace.
「Originally, the Katjvarna Imperial family is a mysterious bloodline. This bloodline contains a power that surpasses humanity and guides them… However, the bloodline has gradually faded with time. I have to find that bloodline and bring eternal prosperity back to the Empire.」
Prince stood before the many paintings arranged by date, and stated his goal. Trisnai would feel a strong urge every time. *That blood flows in me too* ── if only he could tell that to the person before him. But as time passed, he felt it was a taboo. The painting before him depicts the Emperors of the past. Compared to these dignified people, he felt his body was too twisted to be a person of the same blood line.

"If I keep listening to the flattery of the nobles who don't understand respect, my heart will grow vulgar. Do you intend to lead me towards depravity too, Trisnai?"
Prince probed as usual. Trisnai shook his head as he search through the dates of the paintings, and said as he look up at the oldest painting:
"No— I hope you can be just like this painting."
Emperor Luciaro who defeated an army with a wave of his hand. The Prince looked at the majestic figure of the one who planted the Eternal Sprite Tree, and said with a smile:
"The Founding Emperor? —Easier said than done."
"I found it. The fundamental reason why the war between us and Kioka is being dragged out, is because of our over reliance on the army."
Over spending more time together, the Prince started telling Trisnai his views on governance. It was dangerous even for a Prince to say something that might be interpreted as criticism towards the Emperor, but the Prince trusted him enough to speak freely.
"It's good that our nation has a strong army. However, it is a blunder to use war to cover up mishaps in governance. Politics is politics, the military is the military— the two are fundamentally different, and only the Emperor is allowed to manage both. There is no room for the personal benefits of the nobles."
The Prince kept talking until the luxurious palace dishes before him dried up. Trisnai likes the Prince who forgot his meals and kept talking, and the passion of the next Emperor.
"Can you understand, Trisnai? Simply put, it's to return to the starting point. The Emperor will control the government and military flawlessly and lead the nation and our people. That system is the pride of the original Empire. It can't be done by mere mortals— but I can do it. Since I'm an Imperial Prince, I have to do it. I'm the inheritor of the Eternal Sprite Tree. This is an immovable fact."
The Prince always sets high expectations for himself. The Prince believed that his destiny was to be a revered being just like the wise Emperor of the distant past. He didn't think this was just a dream. Because he had the same dream since that day when the both of them stood before that painting.
"I can't complain about my father's reign, However— after I take the throne, it will be my rules. I won't let anyone interfere, my life will begin from there."
"It's as you say."
"Indeed… But that's not what my siblings wish for. A bunch of troublesome people. It will be terrible if I get assassinated before my coronation."
The Prince sighed as he stared at the tea cup in his hand. The Prince then handed the cup to him with a grin.
"Why don't you be a poison tester for me, Trisnai? The colour is deeper today, so I should be on my guard— poison usually taste bitter after all."

□— I will be happy to.□
He took the cup without any hesitation and drank from it— he soon felt an intense fire burning his stomach.
□... Ugh...!□
□Get the doctor!□
The Prince yelled when he noticed the change. By the time the servants rushed over, he had lost consciousness.
□— I didn't expect you to hit the jackpot on the first try, Trisnai. Your luck is terrible, huh?□
Two days later. Thanks to the efforts of the doctors, he barely survived and regained consciousness. The Prince sat beside his bed with an exasperated face.
□... Your highness' health...□
□As you can see, I'm fine. However...□
The Prince looked down. He already realized that he wasn't wearing his undershirt that hides his body. The doctor had removed his clothes for his treatment.
□... Your body is strange. The doctors are surprised too, and say it's a miracle you made it to this age.□
□... I showed you something unsightly...□
He pursed his lips bitterly. He had been carefully searching for the right time to confess, but the Prince found out in such a way. But the Prince ignored his feelings and said:
□What I'm going to say is just drivel, so don't take me seriously.□
□...?□
□There is a strange rumour from some time ago. Aside from the Princes and Princesses currently listed in the Imperial family nominal roll, there is another child with the blood of the Emperor. That child has a birth defect, and wasn't recognized as part of the Imperial family. The child was supposed to be disposed in secret, but a certain noble thought it was too cruel, and forged the background of the child to adopt him as his son...□
He gasped— How did the Prince find out? No, in hindsight, this was only natural. It would be difficult to hide the fact that a child of the Emperor had been □erased□ from other people in the palace. It wouldn't be a surprise if the rumours reached the Prince.
□And of course, I don't believe the rumours. Because the bloodline of the Eternal Sprite Tree won't give birth to children with defects… But many people say it is true. What do you think, Trisnai?□
The Prince asked with a poker face. How should he conceal this? What should he say to earn the Prince's trust?— Such schemes vanished from his heart. He remembered his conversations with the Prince, the time they spent together and the goal they shared. He got his answer.
□What a foolish jest— the Katjvarna Imperial family is sacred and flawless. It's impossible for the descendents of that bloodline to have children with defects.□

He answered. In order to share his feelings with the Prince in the future, he denied his past… He felt a greater pain in his chest than all the beatings he suffered before. The Prince must have sensed that pain.
「That's right── pardon me for asking something foolish.」
The Prince said in a very gentle tone, then touched Trisnai's cheek softly with his fingers.
「Get well soon. It's inconvenient without you around── I can't even smash pots in peace now.」
「… Yes…」
He nodded with his body that was still numb. Until he recovered two weeks later, the Prince would visit him every day.
「── You have been promoted to the Prince's direct vassal! Haha, as I expected!」
Three years after working as an admin officer, he was summoned back to the Izanma house to make his report to that man. The man was overjoyed by that report.
「Listen up, don't let the Prince feel bored. On the other hand, take on the troublesome matters in his stead. If His Highness delegates everything to you, that means we are successful.」
The more he listened, the further his soul withered… His relationship with the Prince was just a new way to make money for this man.
「It's finally time to introduce my daughter to him── Hahaha!」
The man laughing out loud didn't notice Trisnai's eyes. It was like he was looking at walking garbage
With his deepening relationship with the heir apparent of the Emperor, Trisnai's position gradually changed from that of a mere admin officer. 「I'm going to meet my father, come with me──」 When the Prince gave him this order, Trisnai was filled with glee.
「Arshankrut, you seemed to be in good health. I heard there is a weird man following you around recently?」
The 26th Emperor spoke with his son from his throne. He was getting old, but he had a good relationship with the Prince. The Prince answered immediately:
「Yes, father. This is Trisnai Izanma.」
The Prince gestured at Trisnai who was kneeling beside him, and the Emperor looked at him with curious eyes.
「Raise your head── I commend your loyalty for drinking the poison in my son's stead. Have you recovered?」
「── Yes──」
Only at this moment, it took all his might to not quiver when he was answering── his father was right there. His real father who was related to him by blood. However, he couldn't express this emotion. He used all his self restraint to stop himself from acting out of line from that of a vassal.
「I have to reward you. Do you have anything you wish for?」

The Emperor asked kindly, unaware of how Trisnai felt. The word wish reverberated heavily in his chest. He then thought— what did he wish for right now? What was he permitted to ask for?

「———」

「...? What's the matter, Trisnai? Father is asking you a question.」

Prince urged the silent Trisnai to answer. At that moment, the wish took shape in his heart.

「... Please...」

「Hmm?」

「... Please bestow me with a painting… of Your Majesty, Concubine Liyasha and Prince Arshankrut… A painting of these three esteemed people.」

The Emperor tilted his head in surprise when he heard the answer Trisnai gave cautiously.

「It can be made if I order the court painter to do so. However… Is that enough for you?」

The Emperor confirmed with him. He was certain at this moment— this man knows nothing. Either the rumours behind Trisnai's birth didn't reach his ears, or he just laughed it off. Pain and relief assaulted his chest at the same time. He worked hard to not show it and replied:

「In that case— pardon my impudence for making another request. Please grant me permission to display this painting in my residence.」

That was the ultimate luxury he craved for. The Emperor looked impressed:

「I see— Impressive loyalty. You have a good confidant, Arshankrut.」

「Of course, father.」

The Prince said proudly and the Emperor laughed. This might be the most happy moment of his life.

The painting was finished three months later, and was sent to his residence. The Prince stood before the painting hanging on the west wall of the bed room and snorted.

「— The standard is mediocre. I can paint a far better one.」

「No… It's good enough for me. I just need this to be the first thing I will see when I wake up.」

He said his sincere feelings and looked up at the painting… He imagined himself standing beside the painting of his parents and brother. This would never be permitted in reality, but if it was this painting, he could imagine it to his heart's content.

As they grew older, the Emperor's health deteriorated. When he had worked over ten years, the Emperor's illness finally reached a decisive stage.

「— How are things, Your Highness?」

The Prince left the restricted zone after visiting his bedridden father, and Trisnai asked him. The Prince shook his head.

「It's difficult to even converse with him… It has been two months since he was bedridden, but father isn't getting better.」

His words were as cruel as Trisnai expected, which made him bite his lips. However, when he was lost in his sadness, the Prince grabbed and shook his shoulders.

「There is no time to grieve, Trisnai. If father passes away, then my era will begin. The work I will need you to do will be incomparable then before.」

「... The work, I need to do?」

「You won't be just a mere vassal. If you continue serving me, what's waiting for you is the post of Imperial Chancellor ── on par with the Field Marshal that serves as the Emperor's left and right hands. Do you have the resolve to take on this appointment?」

Facing his upcoming reign, the Prince asked his most trusted vassal if he had the resolve. After a moment of silence, he quietly said:

「... Can you give me some time?」

The Prince opened his eyes wide in shock. The Prince stared at his face from up close and asked:

「I thought you'll agree on the spot, why are you hesitating? Are you upset with me?」

He shook his head. He wasn't hesitating, and wasn't bearing a grudge.

「It's my personal problem… Please wait for me a little. I need to put my affairs in order.」

He told the Prince with a resolute face, and understood that it was time.

A few nights later. He took leave and headed to the Izanma mansion.

「Oh, Trisnai. It's been a while, why haven't you visit recently?」

The servant brought him to the living room, and a man and a woman were drinking there with blushed faces. It was a scene he had already gotten tired of. In his memories, these two spent more time drunk than sober.

「But don't worry, we received His Highness' presents in good order. This bottle of wine too. Haha, each one of them can fetch a high price. You sure are a high flyer eh, deformed kid?」

He said with his glass raised. Ignoring the woman sipping on her glass silently, the man stood up as if he just thought of something.

「You came at the right time, I think it's about time to introduce my daughter to His Highness. He is probably picky── but that doesn't matter, it's all good if she gets pregnant. I want to choose a chance when the Prince lets his guard down after getting drunk, when's the next banquet? You can get a seat for my daughter, right?」

In the end, the man's ambition was very simple. He wants to use this connection to hook his daughter up with the Prince, and if it works, she could fight for the position of Queen when the Prince ascends to the throne. And the Izanma that built a deep relationship with the Imperial family would amass great wealth. Completely understanding the man's scheme── Trisnai shook his head.

「... You don't have to worry about that.」

「...Huh? What do you──」

The man approached him puzzlely. At this moment— the heavy sound of a glass falling on the floor came from behind.

「...Ughh, kyaa...!」

The woman was struggling in pain while pressing her neck. The man wanted to rush over, but he tripped over himself and fell onto the floor. He desperately tried to get up, and screamed when he realized:

「Y-You... This wine...!」

「This is a great vintage from a vineyard in the southern territories, its prominent feature is the thick aroma and strong taste, well suited for extra ingredients— and a good ticket to hell.」

He looked at that man as if he was looking at a dying bug, and said to the two of them:

「Oh, I don't bear any grudge against you two. If you didn't take me in, I would have died. I want to repay you for that too. I have many chances to poison you, but I always send the gifts I received to you.」

「... Ughh...」

「However, the situation has changed— Do you understand? Someone who has the honour of becoming the right hand man of the Emperor can't have bugs latching on to them.」

Personal grudges were trivial matters. As someone who would be serving beside the throne, he had to clean away the filth on him— That was the principle behind his action. Simply put, this couple were just lices on his coat.

「I will protect the Imperial family— so please rest in peace on your journey to hell.」

He declared firmly and bowed respectfully to the dying couple. Without any time to even curse, the couple squirmed in pain as they fell into darkness.

「... So that's what you mean by putting your affairs in order? You are really bold.」

Some time later, the Prince caught news of the accident that happened in the Izanma house and rushed to meet him. Although the other party clearly knew everything, he pretended to be oblivious:

「It's heart wrenching for me, their son, but I never thought my parents would die from shellfish toxins.」

By the time the Prince arrived, the bodies were already carried out of the room, and the servants all gave the testimony that the problem appears to be 「the shellfish they had for dinner」. The preparations had been done ahead of time to make this an 「accident」. The Prince grinned at his capability.

「You are going to act dumb to the end? —No, this is good. You can't be a Chancellor without that kind of strength.」

The Prince looked at him and said, then declared firmly:

「Our era is coming— Do your best, Trisnai.」

He knelt down. As a vassal serving his lord, he no longer has any impurities around him.

A month after that 「accident」, the 26th Emperor passed away. The throne was passed down swiftly, and the Prince first in the line of succession—Arshankrut Kitra Katjvarna, became the 27th Emperor of the Katjvarna Empire.

「This is my first time leading a grand army. Fufu, isn't this a majestic sight?」

The first thing the Emperor who ascended the throne did was to retake the eastern territories seized by Kioka. And it wasn't just sending forth an army, but an army led personally by the Emperor. The Emperor swore to do well in both the military and governance.

「Don't fall behind, Trisnai. You might be an admin officer, but you're still a part of my army. Don't give an unsightly showing.」

「Yes, my apologies.」

Trisnai travelled beside the Emperor in the center of the army, but he had just started learning to ride a horse. As he held his reins tight to not fall behind, an officer came from behind.

「Pardon my interruption, Your Majesty. We are getting close to the zone occupied by Kioka.」

「Hmm? Yes, I know.」

「Then please withdraw to the rear. If the enemy discover Your Majesty's location, you will be in danger.」

The officer urged the Emperor to evacuate to a safe zone. When the Emperor heard that, he raised his eyebrows.

「What drivel! Aren't my guards already defending this position!?」

「You're right, my liege, but we can't be too safe. Just having the new Emperor leading us is enough to raise the morale of the troops. Please watch the battle from the rear in ease.」

「Watch the battle? What are you talking about? I'm your commander, right!? That means fighting under my command! To do so, I need to stay in a place where I can clearly see the troops! Am I wrong!」

「But Your Majesty, according to the customs—」

Since it concerns the safety of his monarch, the officer didn't back down easily. With the Emperor insisting on personally taking command, the officer looked troubled.

「... Please wait a moment, I will discuss this with my superiors.」

「Then call your superior over! We are burning daylight on nonsense here!」

The officer carried out his orders, and a vermillion-haired one armed officer with the aura of a veteran came over.

「Greetings, Your Majesty— my subordinate said a lot to me, but in short, you wish to personally take command of the frontlines?」

Unlike the soldiers he had seen so far, this man was direct without mincing his words, which confused the Emperor. However, being overwhelmed by that man wouldn't help with things, so the Emperor displayed his dignity as the monarch and stated his intentions.

□Y-Yes, that’s right. I’m not here just to be a nominal general, but to lead the Empire to victory.□
□Let’s do that then. But the frontline is a gamble, so will it be alright if I, Yorunzaf Igsem, stay by your side as your adjutant?□
□Hmm… V-Very well, I will grant you the honour of assisting my first battle on the field.□
□That’s a great honour.□
The officer grinned. And so, the Emperor took command of the frontlines as he wished— two hours later, he experienced his first battle.
□— Right wing, spread out! Stop dallying! We will get surrounded and wiped out if we are slow!□
A field battle began without either side grasping either side’s strength. The officer yelled, and the troops changed formation at dazzling speed. Trisnai couldn’t tell what was happening, and only focused on protecting his lord in case of an emergency. Meanwhile, the Emperor was overwhelmed by the battle.
□U-Ughh—□
□We can’t continue like this, I propose we flank the enemy and attack their rear! What’s your order, Your Majesty?□
The officer checked in before giving out orders. However, the situation changed again before the Emperor could even judge if that was the right call. The Emperor could only nod at whatever the officers said.
□Erm— Y-Yes, proceed.□
□Yes Sir□! Everyone, go get them! Charge as if your live depends on it□!□
□□□□□□Warrrgghh!□□□□□□
□.....□□... Your Majesty.□
After beating off the enemy, in a corner of the base where many wounded soldiers laid on the ground, the Emperor was silent. However— when even Trisnai couldn’t find anything to discuss with him, the one armed officer visited again.
□Pardon me— Your Majesty, good work on your first battle. You worked harder than I expected, I’m relieved you didn’t fall off your horse midway.□
Ignoring the wide eyed Trisnai, the officer wasn’t being completely sarcastic, and was a little impressed. However, that wasn’t enough to console the Emperor. He still couldn’t accept the fact that he couldn’t do anything despite demanding the command of the frontlines.
□Seventy odd men died in that battle. I was expecting less deaths, I apologize for my lack of ability.□
□.....!□
His words this time were clear sarcasm. Because you took command, soldiers that would have lived ended up dead. The Emperor had no words against that fact.
□Your Majesty, the battlefield is ever changing, so it’s normal for theory on paper to be useless. Before talking about strategy, we need to hone our

mind and body to fight on the frontlines. If it is not too much of a hassle, please keep that in mind.」
Judging that he had said enough, the vermillion haired one armed officer bowed and left. Unable to stand by idly any further, he shouted at that officer's back.
「...Yorunzaf, your tone with――」
「―― Forget it!」
But the Emperor restrained him. He turned in surprise, and saw his liege shaking his head weakly.
「―― That's enough, Trisnai. Don't say anymore. Don't let me… shame myself further.」
The eastern territories were recaptured from Kioka after many sacrifices, and Arshankrut's first battle ended with relative success. However, the Emperor never took to the field ever again.
「... Leading the battle personally is meant to leave an impression of my reign onto the world, but I got the order wrong. Instead of war, my priority should be dealing with the problems in governance.」
「Yes, that's Your Majesty's main task.」
He nodded without hesitation, knowing that the priority right now was to heal the Emperor's wounded ego. The Emperor realized this unconsciously, and proposed a plan to recover his reputation.
「Listen, Trisnai, I have been thinking of a plan, building a reservoir upstream of the Golna river in the western territories. How's that, isn't it a revolutionary plan?」
A servant handed a document listing the gist of the plan to Tristan when the Emperor signaled with his gaze. After reading through the contents carefully, he had to think carefully before saying:
「... I'm impressed by Your Majesty's bold plan. Pardon me, but… For the first project after your coronation, isn't the scale too big? The manpower, timeline, and budget are tremendous. We should start from a smaller project――」
His words were cut off by a fist slamming on the throne. The Emperor roared with a beet red face:
「You're saying I failed again?」
「――」
He stood stiffly at a loss for words. A vassal beside him then walked forth:
「No no, Your Majesty, this is a brilliant plan! The bold concept and detailed design is a plan befitting a king!」
The man who served as Imperial Chancellor since the previous Emperor praised the plan loudly. Seeing that Trisnai had made the Emperor unhappy, he was planning to promote himself.
「T-That's right, isn't it! Military strategy aside, governance is my domain. It's impossible for my plan to have any flaws!」

"Indeed. Please leave the operations to me, I will work on the budget, manpower and the preparation. My experience can't be compared to a mere admin officer."
With the strong support of the Chancellor, the plan was set before Trisnai could stop it. If the Emperor wished for it, he couldn't stop things as a mere admin officer. No matter how clear the results would be—
"... He wants to build a reservoir here?"
As expected, during the inspection of the planned reservoir site, many illogical parts of the plan were exposed. Facing the hard rocky ground and insufficient footing, the personnel on site could only stand stiffly in place.
"Is the Emperor serious? Or rather… has he seen this place himself?"
"W-Where do we start..."
"We can only put down our heads and dig… But with this terrain, even digging will be difficult."
Since it was impossible to even estimate what needs to be done, it was only adequate to deem the project to be impossible. However, since this was a perfect plan designed personally by the Emperor, then the person in charge would lose his head if he reported it like that. After troubling over it for a long time, they came up with a compromise.
"... Okay, we will depict the terrain with drawings, and add in a line "difficult to estimate how long the project will take". We can't suggest the termination of the plan, but the Emperor will notice the situation here if we write that..."
They already did their best. They had to avoid harming the reputation of their monarch, and urge the Emperor to notice. However— contrary to their expectations, this report was intercepted before reaching the hands of the Emperor.
""Difficult to estimate how long the project will take"? ...What nonsense, it's a pain that the people on site are so inflexible."
Chancellor tore up the report from the job site after reading it. It didn't matter if the report was correct or not, the contents of the letter would benefit him.
"What timeline, isn't it more convenient for it to drag on? There will be more chances to seize the budget—"
He couldn't allow this letter to be delivered. This Chancellor wouldn't let this chance to fatten his wallet go.
"—What happened to the reservoir plan!? It has exceeded the timeline by over a year!"
No matter how many reports he intercepted, there wouldn't be any progress since the plan was unreasonable. As expected, the frustrated Emperor complained, but the Chancellor didn't panic.
"My apologies. Due to the sudden illness of the site supervisor, bad weather and other issues… I regret to inform you that we couldn't execute Your Majesty's perfect plan in its entirety."

The Emperor was at a loss of words when he said that… For him, admitting that this project was unreasonable was the most unbearable thing to him. But he had already sensed it. In a sense, he might be happier being a completely foolish Emperor.

「But don't worry, with the efforts of your humble vassal, the project is finally at an end. Three months── no, two months later, the job completion report will come in. I seek your understanding and patience...」

「... Hmm… Two more months, is that true?」

「Of course!」

The Chancellor promised with a smile. He might be saying that, but the man knew he could drag it a few more months, since the Emperor couldn't face the real reason why there wasn't any progress with the project.

In the end, the severely delayed reservoir was 「completed」. But the Emperor didn't even inspect the result. He already knew that the result was too pathetic to be called a lake, much less a reservoir.

Arshankrut failed repeatedly after taking the throne, but only one thing was going smoothly. That was his duty to pass down the bloodline and prepare a successor.

「Your Majesty! The First Prince is born!」

On that day when his eldest son was born. The Emperor picked up the child that his queen had birthed with a brilliant smile.

「Ohh, what an energetic child. Good boy, I have thought of your name. You shall be Raisiam, named after the 8th wise Emperor Karsiam. Grow well and become my successor──」

The Emperor who wasn't sure how to hold a baby said troublingly.

However── this might seem like a happy event at a glance, but the admin officers in a corner of the room was chattering about something dangerous:

「... Have you heard? Three other concubines in the harem are pregnant.」

「... Ughh, the pace is too fast. If this continues, there will be many Princes and Princesses in the next ten years. The succession battle will be more intense compared to the Emperor's time...」

Trisnai glared when he heard the inappropriate chatter, and the admin officers shut up. However── he was also feeling the same worries.

Unlike what he imagined when he was a Prince, the duties shouldered by the Emperor wasn't glamorous nor easy. When he was troubled over one issue, more unsolvable problems would crop up.

「...The price of wheat keeps increasing, Kioka destroyed too many fields in the last war. What should we do...」

Of these problems, those concerning economics troubled Arshankrut deeply. It requires careful judgement, and this Emperor lacked understanding with regards to the circulation of money. In the end, Trisnai had to cover for him.

「Your Majesty. It will take time for our measures to take effect, but we need to feed the citizens right now. Use the funds from the treasury to purchase

the wheat and sell them at a low price. At the same time, demand the merchants to not go overboard.
But this will affect many people. The nobles will complain too.
I will try to settle these noises. I will need more forceful methods… Your Majesty, your decision please.
As his vassal stood before him to ask for permission, the Emperor leaned back on his throne with a sigh.
… Yes, I will leave it to you. I no longer know what to do…
… You flatter me. My strength is my Lord’s strength, please wait patiently for the good news.
He said strongly and realized in a corner of his mind— even if he sent in good news, that would also hurt the Emperor’s heart.
After much trials and tribulations, the Emperor still put his trust firmly in Trisnai. That would naturally earn the ire and jealousy of the nobles around him.
Trisnai is getting more powerful. Can’t we dispose of him?
I feel the same, but don’t underestimate that man. The word on the street is, the tragedy of the Izanma is his doing. And there’s this rumour about his birth… From the trust His Majesty gives him, it might be true.
Are you kidding me? I won’t accept this. That man has no idea about the rules of the nobles, how can we leave someone who doesn’t even know how to share the profits in the palace?
After this, he had to support the Emperor while he battled politically against factions plotting his downfall. It was a cruel and insidious war, different from that of martial might.
Hahaha, you want to bear my children so badly!? Very well, come to my chambers too! I will share the bloodline of the king with you too!
On the other hand, the more he failed, the further the Emperor drifted away from his governance duty. The Emperor immersed himself in his harem, and indulged in banquets and the pleasure of the flesh every night. He had to warn him:
… Pardon my impudence, Your Majesty. With your number of children and your pregnant concubines, there are enough successors. Please refrain from—
Before he could finish, a plate flew out and hit his head, making him bleed from the forehead. The Emperor yelled in drunken stupor:
You are out of line, Trisnai! How dare you interfere with the matters of my bedchambers!
His advice failed to reach because of the alcohol. He swallowed his words, not daring to bring it up again, and bowed deeply in apology:
… My apologies, I beg your pardon.
The Emperor wouldn’t listen to any advice during the banquet, and would always fall into self loath the day after.
Trisnai, I’m sorry about yesterday. I drank too much last night…

In his bedchambers within the restricted zone that no one could enter, the Emperor held his heavy head and apologized meekly. Trisnai shook his head with a smile.
「Don’t take it to heart, it’s all my fault.」
「Don’t say that, don’t cast me aside.」
The Emperor grabbed his sleeve and pleaded. His hand was trembling.
「I never knew when I was a Prince. Being the Emperor── the throne is such a lonely place.」
「Your Majesty…」
「Don’t cast me aside. Please don’t leave me, Trisnai. I’m scared, I’m afraid of being the Emperor…」
The Emperor’s heart was caught between his heavy responsibility and his failure in fulfilling his duties. He couldn’t say anything as he watched that powerless figure.
There were no ends to a decay. The only successful thing was the birth of successors. But after the birth of the 7th child, a clear gloom hung over the court.
「… Another birth?」
Even when he received news of the birth, the Emperor didn’t look happy. He sighed annoyedly, and said with disinterest:
「… I’m going to rest, think up a name for that child.」
「Please wait, Your Majesty. The name of the child aside, the agendas for the audience──」
「All of you can meet the requestors, and can take care of it… Things will be smoother like this anyway.」
He gritted his teeth. He realized that his lord was slowly losing his last bastion of dignity.
One day, as he was thinking hard about how to speak with his lord, he found the Emperor holding a brush before a canvas inside a room within a palace.
「Your Majesty, are you painting? It’s been a while since I last saw you paint.」
「Be quiet, Trisnai. You’ll distract me.」
That shut him up, and he stood in a corner of the room. The back of the Emperor facing the canvas looked just like the Prince in the past, which made him happy.
「… Ugh! Guu!…」
However, the person was different now. Withdrawal symptoms from alcohol made his hand tremble, and the Emperor couldn’t move his right arm as he wished. The Emperor painted a line that differed from what he had in mind, and he couldn’t help shouting:
「Damn it── is the brush looking down on me too!?」
The Emperor threw his brush onto the floor, then kicked over the canvas. Seeing the Emperor rage quit and leaving, he couldn’t help calling out even though it was meaningless:
「Your Majesty──」

「Enough, throw this trash away! ―Servants, bring me wine! Serve it to me, post haste!」
The servants who heard the angry roar rushed to get the wine bottles. There was nowhere for the Emperor to escape, except into the embrace of his concubine and the stupor of alcohol.
A few years later. When he learned about the birth of the 14th child, something snapped inside the Emperor.
「― Another one? When will my children stop tormenting me!」
This was no longer good news, but a nightmare. This was his own fault, but the Emperor couldn't restrain himself or have the magnanimity to accept advice. Ignoring his silent vassals, the Emperor bit his thumbnail and muttered:
「... I don't want her.」
「Huh?」
Trisnai couldn't understand what his lord was saying. The Emperor soon repeated himself.
「I don't want her, strangle her and throw her away!」
The Emperor was almost screeching now. Trisnai pretended not to hear, and searched for the words to soothe the Emperor.
「― Your Majesty, please calm down.」
「I'm serious! Strangle her and throw her away! Don't add more to my troubles!」
Saying it a third time made the vassals turn pale. Someone had to advise him― however, doing so to a half crazed Emperor was as good as suicide. Due to the effects of alcohol, his anxiety and delusion deteriorated his mind further, and the Emperor started wearing a sword. The number of servants and vassals who died in his hands had exceeded double digits.
「... I can't follow that order.」
Everyone kept their mouths shut, and he was the only one who squeezed out a voice towards the Emperor. The Emperor glared at him with blood shot eyes.
「... What did you say, Trisnai?」
「I said, I can't follow that order… Your humble vassal can't harm a scion of the Imperial family. Even if this is a command of the Emperor, I can't follow that order.」
When he heard that rebuke, the Emperor stood up from the throne like a spring. He could feel the cold steel of the drawn blade on his neck when inspiration struck:
「― Why don't we entrust her to Kioka?」
The hand holding the hilt stopped. The Emperor asked sternly:
「... What are you saying?」
「Your humble servant suggests that we entrust the Princess to Kioka as part of the Armistice negotiations with them. She won't be part of the succession battle or trouble Your Majesty.」

This was the biggest compromise he could make. After a suffocating silence, the Emperor lowered his arm weakly.
"... Yes, that's good. I will leave the details to you, just don't let the baby enter my sights. Or else, I might strangle her myself..."
He returned his sword into his scabbard with trembling hands, then collapsed onto his throne. All the vassals sighed in relief when they saw that scene.

「... That was close, Princess...」
After that incident. He stood before the cot of the sleeping baby that the Emperor wanted to kill and discard.
「You have a very similar experience as me, but your limbs are intact and your body is healthy. That's right, you are undoubtedly a member of the Imperial family.」
He said with envious eyes, and carefully picked up the baby. He called out passionately to the baby who possessed everything that he had lost.
「Please grow up well and healthily. May you display the makings of an Empress, and return to this country.」
Shortly after getting agitated over the incident of the child, the Emperor even got tired of sitting on the throne. He ran around the palace in search of his lord, and found that figure in a nostalgic place.
「Oh, so you're here, Your Majesty. I'm relieved. You didn't bring any attendants with you, so I was wondering where you were.」
The Emperor was inside the room that displayed the art pieces by the palace artists. He was seated in the chair at the leftmost edge of the room, staring at a painting. He walked to the back of the Emperor and said:
「Are you looking at the paintings? The battle of the Founding Emperor Luciaro… this is your favourite art piece.」
He said as he thought about the past. The Emperor said quietly:
「... I wanted to be like him.」
He spoke of his dream that had ended. Tears welled in the Emperor's eyes.
「That's right, I wanted to become like him. Sweeping away the enemy without giving any grounds, and governing with excellence from the throne. I deeply believed that I have such a talent...」
「.....」
「... But I'm wrong. I left war to the generals, and governance to your group… I'm just a foolish monarch you can find anywhere. The mystery hidden in the Imperial bloodline didn't revive in me...」
Tears fell on the tightly clenched fists on the Emperor's knees. He cut off the Majesty's self loathing with a firm voice.
「That's not true, Your Majesty. You can——」
「Don't ask more of me, Trisnai.」
The Emperor cut him off before he could finish. His lord said to Trisnai who was frozen in place.
「... Please, don't ask anything more of me, it's too painful. Bonded by the dreams I couldn't achieve no matter how much I struggle pains me...!」
He understood that the Emperor was at his limits, and his Liege's life wouldn't improve further. Arshankrut Kitra Katjvarna could never blossom as an Emperor.
「... Next time...」

The despairing man said. It was clear from his tone that he felt useless for betraying the Imperial bloodline.
"Maybe the next generation can realize it? Maybe they can show the superiority of the Imperial bloodline?"
He creased the corner of his eyes in sadness. He might be utterly disappointed in himself, but this wish has never changed— the revival of the mysterious bloodline in its rightful glory. He knew this was impossible for him, but the man wants to entrust this onto someone with the same bloodline.
"— Is that your wish, Emperor Arshankrut?"
He asked with a trembling tone. As if his head was losing out to gravity, the Emperor nodded slowly.
"Revive the bloodline of the Eternal Sprite Tree in it's rightful glory. This takes priority over all things, Trisnai. Even if I end my life as a foolish monarch, this is the only thing that won't change. It can't change..."
"... Your will is my command."
He nodded heavily and reached into his pocket— he had an inkling that things would turn out this way for a long time now. That was why he made preparations as he hoped this moment would never come.
He took out a sachet of powder, placed it beside a pot of water and served it to the Emperor.
"This is a medicine to sedate your emotions. Please take this and rest, Your Majesty."
"... Yes..."
The Emperor poured the powder into his mouth without hesitation and washed it down with water. He bid farewell in his heart— this medicine will dissolve everything that was tormenting this man, along with his ability to think.
"Please don't worry, Your Majesty— I will make your dream a reality."
He didn't feel lost anymore. He decided to do whatever it takes until a proper Emperor takes the throne.
The first thing he thought of was— there needs to be a "selection". He had to see which member of the Imperial family was most suited for the throne. Not a deformed child like him, or his brother who failed— a true Emperor must take the throne.
"— Just one more step, Emperor Arshankrut, and our dream will come true. Under the reign of your daughter, Empress Chamille, the Katjvarna Empire will prosper forever."
He yearned for that day to come. In a corner of the market, Trisnai Izanma said to himself in a daze.
"Ikuta Sankrei— be proud that you can become the foundation of a prosperous nation. You can pay for the sin of attempting to make Empress Chamille into a mere mortal with your life.
No matter what, this war is your last job— work hard in the time you have left."

「—Field Marshal Sir!」
The tense call from his subordinate stirred Ikuta from his deep sleep. He opened his eyes and saw Major Megu hanging her head vexingly.
「... My deepest apologies, I wanted to let you sleep until the scheduled time...」
「It's fine, I slept well— Is Jean making a ruckus?」
Ikuta sat up and said, then returned to the headquarters. He observed the changes to the flag's position on the map as Major Megu explained:
「Three defensive bases are doing badly. Especially Brigadier General Sazarf's base, the enemy's attack is intense...」
「Connect me to the scene right away—Kusu!」
「— Sazarf here! Like I reported an hour ago, the situation is really bad!」
His first words conveyed the harshness of the battle. With gunshots and explosions in the background, Sazarf raised his voice so he wouldn't be drowned out.
「The enemy is putting in a lot of effort too...! They moved their Blast Cannons to high ground, and are aiming directly at our base! The accuracy and pressure is unlike before!」
「... They took the high ground? From the terrain there, the cliff will block their way, and the trajectory shouldn't reach the base...」
「That is correct in the start, but they used Dynamic Air to demolish it— I mentioned before that they used this trick on me in Arfatra, right? This time, they used just a few short days to blow up that cliff. They seemed more proficient in using Dynamic Air now...!」
「... Tell me honestly, how long can you hold out?」
「... Three days at most. Any longer... we can still manage, but we will lose a lot of soldiers.」
Sazarf said bitterly. Accepting that this number couldn't be extended further, Ikuta answered without hesitation.
「I understand. Then please start to retreat two days later. I will arrange our allies on the other routes to match your withdrawal.」
「... Is that really fine?」
「Yes. From the looks of things, your name will likely be on the KIA list on the third day—」
<KIA: Killed in Action.>
Ikuta ended the call after giving his orders, then took the next step.
「Kusu, connect me with big bro Sariha.」
Kusu did as he was told, and the call connected a few seconds later.
「Solork here, can you hear me?」
「... This is Sarihasrag! The battle is tougher than we expected!」
Sariha and Sushuraf were lying low in a trench, taking cover from the spread shot raining from above.
「Brigadier General Sazarf's zone is at their limit, once they break through, the enemy will flank to your rear. So please withdraw after 32 hours.」

Is that fine? That’s far earlier than the schedule!
My policy is to prioritize the soldiers over the plan, so come back safely, big bro Sariha. Oh, please take care of Suya too.
Huh? Hey—
After giving the necessary order, Ikuta ended the call. Sariha clicked his tongue and told his brother.
... Start the retreat in 32 hours. Tell the men to get ready and keep things inconspicuous.
Understood, big brother.
After finishing up the calls swiftly, Ikuta shifted to the next person.
— Help me contact Solvenares Honorary Field Marshal.
The Sprite in his pouch notified him of a call. The vermillion haired general who was sitting down for a long rest after quite some time picked up immediately:
— Solvenares here. The guerilla mission is proceeding smoothly.
Brigadier General Sazarf’s unit will withdraw two days later. I predict that the enemy will pursue them. Please protect their rear.
Understood.
Solvenares ended the call after receiving that order. He stood up and told the riders around him:
We will move to our ally’s retreat path. Follow me.
Huh, wait, I’m only half done with my food…! Ah~ really!
Niam shoved the rest of her food into her mouth and stood up, and the other riders walked to their horses.
Don’t fall behind. We will sleep in six hours according to the schedule. If we don’t maintain our pace, that number will increase.
The vermillion-haired general mounted his horse after saying that. Niam followed quickly and shouted:
You don’t need to tell me that! Just watch, I will get my beauty sleep tonight!
Just keep down your snoring.
Same to you!
She retorted her comrade’s joke quickly and held the reins.
... Our defence line have fallen back greatly.
Major Megu said with a worried face. Ikuta stretched his arms up to loosen his muscles that had turned stiff during his sleep.
Sigh, I will try to adjust to it. I want to avoid having any adverse effects for the latter half of our battle.
He said as he looked down at the map, looking at a prominent terrain along the Kioka’s predicted advance route.
The next chokepoint is the river, huh.

— This is the Third Division. We have broken through the enemy’s stronghold, and are advancing.

Two days later. The Kioka headquarters received a message from the forces on Imperial grounds.

「The pace isn't bad. And the pursuit of the enemy forces?」

「We sent out cavalry and infantry, and should be able to catch them this time.」

「Good. But be careful. We lost many scouts that we sent out, so the enemy appears to have a strong guerilla cavalry.」

「Yes... I will keep that in mind.」

The white-haired officer ended the call after warning his subordinate. He considered the smooth movement of his forces in the past few days, and Miara said to him:

「Your condition is getting better, Jean.」

「I have been in perfect condition since the start, Miara. It seems our technique in using Dynamic Air has exceeded the enemy's expectations. It is a stroke of luck that we can shave off the protruding terrain by demolishing it. In battles on enemy grounds, such things are a matter of luck.」

He explained as he looked at the map, and thought about the future developments.

「We can't rest on our laurels with just this much of an advantage. It's the nature of war for luck to switch sides on a whim.」

「You are right.」

「There's nothing to worry about… If we win the naval battle and land on their shore, the war will lean heavily on our side.」

Jean said as if to calm himself, and looked at his partner on the table.

「Let's check in with the situation on the sea── Luna, connect me to the 「Great Mother of White Wings」.」

「── This is Elulufay Tenerexilla. We have been in pursuit of the defeated enemy ships since a few days ago.」

The Great Mother answered as she watched the enemy fleet from the deck of the 「White Wings」. They were the leading elements of the Kioka fleet, but were a few nautical miles away from the rear of the enemy fleet.

「We can't catch their tail. This being the Empire's turf is one factor, but they simply have better sails technique than us. If a few ships including mine pursue in force, we might catch them, but...」

If she was prepared for some risk, she would have already done so.

Elulufay's proposal received an answer a few seconds later:

「... No, continue the pursuit at the pace of the whole fleet. I trust your skills, but that's exactly why I don't want you to take unnecessary risks under such circumstances. I want you to make a landing without taking any losses.」

「Understood, I will do so… In that case, we can't ignore the enemy fleet. If they cut off the sea route after we enter the port, we might run out of supplies before we link up with you. We need to eliminate the enemy remnants first.」

「That's fine. How much time do you need?」

「It’s hard to gauge If we match the pace of my commander… It will depend on the wind, but I will try pursuing them for five more days. If we can’t catch them, will you consider my proposal?」
She suggested again. Jean didn’t refuse this time.
「… I understand, I will give you a direct order when the time comes. I will try to shoulder the accusation from your commander, but you should be ready to get dragged in too.」
「Don’t worry, I’m used to such things.」
She answered with a smile, then focused on pursuing the enemy fleet after ending the call.
When Jean and Elulufay’s call ended and he was about to issue a different order, his partner alerted him of an incoming call.
「A call from Prime Minister Kyakushii.」
Jean’s face turned tense. As Miara watched on with concern, he picked up the call from the Prime Minister.
「… This is Jean Arkinex.」
「── Hi, Jean. The war seems to be going smoothly.」
Capital Norandot’s Parliament house, main office. With a large group of secretaries battling with mountains of documents in the background, Ario Kyakushii spoke with the white-haired officer.
「This isn’t under your purview, but news of the navy’s victory made me relieved. Because in this war, the greatest source of uncertainty is the sea. It’s a blow that Elulufay can’t be the fleet commander because of her two years in captivity. I wanted her to lead this crucial battle because she had learned from her defeat.」
The man said as he stamped on a document before him. At this moment, he was working to replenish the supply line.
「However── it might not be enough to make up for that, but I’m proud that I managed to convert the entire fleet into Blast Cannon ships. The war is already decided before tactics on the battlefield come into play. I couldn’t help laughing whenever I look at the budget I robbed for this.」
「Thanks to that, we had more options available to us.」
「Yes. Oh, I know the general situation of the battle on land. But Jean── tell me what you think about our chances?」
The Prime Minister asked frankly. After pausing for a moment, a voice answered:
「… We have the advantage, six to four.」
「Excluding the victory in the sea?」
「Excluding… We can only include them in our calculations after the fleet landed and linked up with our forces.」
Ario accepted Jean’s answer that didn’t make any assumptions.
「I’m happy to see you’re not being careless── are the supplies alright?」
「Thanks to you, we don’t have such troubles. I can’t thank you enough for providing ready supplies to such a large army.」

“I’m happy to hear that— use them generously. Whether it is food, munitions or medical supplies, don’t hold back on using them. Such worries should be shouldered by us politicians after the war ends. As a soldier, you just need to focus on how to defeat the enemy.”
The man stated firmly, then added as if he remembered something:
“The only exception is the shells for the large cannons, we can’t manufacture and transport that thing easily. I hope you can consider the ammo left and use it during key moments.”
“Yes, we relied heavily on the large cannon in our first battle. We have half of our ammunition left— but that’s enough.”
A reliable answer came from the Sprite. Ario imagined the face of the youth and said:
“I will await for your good news about the capture of their capital— work hard, my son.”
When the white-haired officer ended the call with his adoptive father, Miara talked to him before he made the next call.
“…Jean, why don’t you rest for a while?”
Jean turned back, frowning in surprise by what she said:
“When the situation is 6 to 4?— I will never rest. Because at this moment, that guy must be thinking up a strategy to turn the tide.”
Miara couldn’t refute that. Ignoring her worries, the youth continued:
“With the advent of Sprite communication, all the information on the battlefield can be sent to the officers in real time, and my orders can be carried out in real time too. This can only mean one thing— this is a war between commanders. That guy and me are facing each other over a gigantic chess board.”
Jean said as he glared into space. As long as he could see Ikuta Solork there, there was no room for others to interfere. Miara bit her lips and hung her head.
“I can even feel his breath. I know it— that guy hasn’t given up.”
Jean was certain and returned his eyes onto the map. The future developments were playing out vividly in his mind.
“The next chokepoint is the river.”
“
The defensive base was abandoned close to the limit, and the soldiers retreated to the next base. Repeating these steps to exhaust the Kioka forces was the Imperial army’s strategy, but once the enemy saw through it, it would be difficult to pull it off for the second time.
“Run, run!” “Quickly! The enemy is closing in!”
The soldiers ran down the road with ragged breath. There was no time to idle, the enemy was right on their heels. But they had run for almost two hours— and were almost at their limits.
“Huff, puff… I-I can’t breath…”
“Pull yourself together! We tossed our gear midway, it will be all over if they catch up…!”

A voice encouraged the soldiers who had slowed down. When they were moving to the rear, they had permission from the commander to abandon their equipment— this was Ikuta’s orders. They would have been caught if they were lugging their heavy equipment with them.
The soldiers ran towards the next base. However— the sound of hooves reached their ears, and they felt a chill on their backs.
「E-Enemy attack—」「Damn it—!」
The few people who turned back saw the approaching enemy cavalry. Having abandoned their weapons, they couldn’t even resist. When they had almost resigned themselves to their fate—
「—Seh!」
The next moment, a friendly unit came from the flank and scattered the pursuing enemies. He opened his eyes and—
「... A-Allies...?」「A roving cavalry unit...! Hey, we’re saved!」
The excitement from escaping death filled the soldiers with exhilaration. One of the riders approached them and said:
「Hey, hurry up and run! The defence line is 5 km away! We can only stall them for 30 minutes!」
Niam herded the soldiers like a shepherd dog, and they ran on her urging.
「T-Thank you...!」「Five more kilometers... And we can survive...!」
Thirty minutes later, Sazarf saw the last units arrive without being pursued by the enemy.
「They are finally here! Quickly, get in!」
Lieutenant Colonel Melza ushered in the panting soldiers into the trenches. After they went in, they blockaded the gap.
「We have finished confirmation! All retreating units have arrived, Lieutenant Colonel Melza!」
「Understood! —the preparations are complete, Brigadier General Sazarf!」
She walked down the trenches and shouted, and Sazarf nodded and raised his voice:
「Good— from now on, we will begin the garrison of the river defence base!」
The soldiers turned tense. The trenches they were garrisoning were made by piling a lot of soil alongside the river. Since it was beside the river, water would flood in if they dig too much. It was more troublesome to work on the trenches here compared to other work sites, but given the tactical importance of this base, it was worth the effort.
「This is the only river defence base we can prepare along the enemy’s invasion route. It will be a disgrace if we can’t hold out here— all of you, give it your all!」
A few hours later, the Kioka army was facing off that same base. In a corner of the troops spread out along the river, a buff officer snorted. He was Jean’s ally, Major Taznyado Harrah.
「— It can’t be helped, this is the only place where we can cross the river. I know that but...」

He muttered, and a petite soldier— Sergeant Major Mita Kenshi jogged towards him.
「I measured the water level. It's not too deep, but not shallow enough for us to force our way through. We should give up on breaking through with numbers.」
「It will be easy if we can seize the bridge.」
「They intentionally left the bridge intact because that's what we will think. I can bet all the money in my wallet that the bridge had been set to be blown up.」
She turned and looked at the enemy base. Like she said, there was only one bridge across the river leading to the enemy. It might seem like the optimal advance route, but since the Empire already had Blast Cannons, they could demolish a large bridge quickly. They would suffer heavy losses if they got greedy and attempted to cross the bridge.
「I feel the same way, it is up to Jean to figure out what we need to do— I will make a report.」
「— A combination of a river and trenches, and the water depth is unfavourable?」
After hearing Harrah's report, Jean thought for a few seconds and concluded:
「… It will be best to assume that your group alone isn't enough to break through.」
「It's rare hearing you say that.」
「I can think of a way, and if the enemy has a mediocre commander, there must be a method to break through. However— not this time. Assuming that guy will come up with a countermeasure, I can't think of a way to break through without incurring heavy casualties.」
「So— we wait for the detachment unit to flank them?」
「Best to assume that. Continue pressuring them with bombardments and wait for your chance— I won't let you wait long.」
At the same time. A few km behind the Kioka forces at the river.
「— Heave ho, this one's finished!」
The Kioka soldiers wielding hammers and chisels were making canoes hollowed out of trees. Their comrades were impressed by the results:
「This is the first time I'm seeing a dugout canoe… And it looks better than I expected.」
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dugout_canoe
>
「Right. Are such canoes common in the former Nitagua region?」
「It's not that common. My family happens to operate a river transport company, and this is a traditional art from the time of my ancestors. All family member will have a small canoe by age 10.」
The female soldier answered the question as she crafted the next canoe:

「Suitable trees are brought here from the rear, going at this pace, we can make quite a number of canoes in a few days… Sigh, I was really shocked to find all the trees near the river had been cleared.」
「However── since we are getting lumber from the rear, that means the 「Insomniac Brilliant General」 already expected this?」
Another soldier besides her said as he worked on a different canoe. A soldier then said:
「If we go further, for all of us from a town with river transport to be assigned to this unit… I finally understand the reason for my posting. This is really far sighted thinking.」
He chiseled away the bark, and a new canoe was completed.
「Normally, we will do the final touch up here, but this is enough for a river crossing. We need to prioritize on the numbers.」
「Yes, got it.」「My arms are tired…」
The soldier wiped away the sweat on her brow. They continued crafting canoes for their comrades on the frontlines.
「── Phew…!」
The sound of exploding compressed air echoed throughout the river bank. After confirming that the enemy had been scattered, Torway contacted headquarters.
「… It's tough, Ik-kun. The enemies has increase their number of invasion routes.」
「Yes, I know. Where are you right now?」
「The northern outskirts of the upstream fifth zone. The enemy tried to cross the river with boats, and we came to engage them. We should have fell the trees around the river…」
「They probably transport it in through their supply line. They brought it out shortly after encountering the river base, they are really well prepared.」
Ikuta said in awe, then continued:
「Including this incident── we already expected this, but the enemy is well supplied. They expended munitions so freely, and are still not showing signs of rationing their shells for the second half of the battle. The frontlines are confident that the rear will keep sending in supplies.」
「Keep sending in, huh? Amazing. I heard that the anti-war faction in Kioka is gaining momentum.」
「That's exactly why, they have no way back if they lose this war. Ario Kyakushii must have bet all his political chips to get the budget. This is a total war.」
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_war
>
They weren't just fighting the Kioka army, but the entire Kioka Republic. Feeling that again from Ikuta's words, Torway said:
「I can say for certain that the enemy's main force isn't here. I have stationed many soldiers to keep watch at the river bank… but even my team

can not block small units infiltrating under the cover of night. If they linked up with their main forces, they will become a huge threat.」
「I will deal with that somehow. Continue patrolling the key points along the river to stop the enemy's infiltration.」
Before ending the call, Ikuta added:
「And it's about time to pay attention to the sky… Given the situation, they will probably send that out.」
「── And so, now is the key moment to use the Air Troopers.」
Continuing his duty as frontline commander since the war broke out, Colonel Gatra listened to his adjutant, Major Mazeya's advice.
「Hmm. The shallow banks that can be crossed on foot are being tightly guarded, so the only way to cross is via boats or balloons. Especially the balloons, which are capable of reaching deep into the opposite bank in one go. If used properly, we can surround the enemy base by the river.」
「However… if the enemy see through our plans, all of them might get shot down.」
「I want to avoid such a tragedy… To be safe, we can wait and link up with the Navy. What will the Brilliant General think about that?」
Colonel Gatra glanced at the Sprite inside the pouch on his waist. They didn't plan to strike before their next orders arrived.
「── How about sending out cavalry upstream and downstream as a diversion?」
Miara suggested to Jean as an adjutant, helping him strategize an attack on the base by the river.
「If they see us massing forces along the river, they have to gather their troops there to oppose us. We can then use balloons or boats to invade with a large number of people… That's the plan I have in mind.」
Jean crossed his arms and nodded solemnly at that proposal.
「Not bad, it's a good idea. However── it would be a bad move in this case.」
「Bad move──?」
「Do you remember the battle in the Gagarukasakan Forest? Water has replaced the fire, but both situations are similar. We want to send our troops to the opposite bank, while the opponent wants to stop our invasion.」
「... That's right.」
「The main force back then was the Aldera Holy Army, but there was an overwhelming difference in numbers. Even so, that man still stubbornly resisted our invasion. He deftly used a small force to defend a wide area. His proficiency in mobile defence is mind boggling. And he has plenty of prep time for this war, so we shouldn't assume that crossing the river will be easier compared to that time.」
After eliminating any optimistic thoughts, Jean concluded:
「A simple diversion will be seen through. Since there is Sprite Communication, he won't allow his subordinates to do something as shallow as gathering their forces at the sight of enemy units. We still need to work on the plan further.」

「…Yes.」
After learning how hopelessly bad her opinion was, Miara hung her head in shame.
「… Use the balloon as a diversion… No, if we raise a balloon, the enemy can see through it? Then increase the number of canoes…」
Jean lost himself in formulating a tactic, as if nothing else exists to him. The intangible barrier that was right before her made Miara feel powerless.
「… Make a show of a forced river crossing at these five points. We don't need to cross completely, if we put the canoes into the water, they would have to defend against us. Observe the units they sent out to ascertain the numbers of their roving unit. We will send a battalion of Air Troopers through the two weakest defence points upstream and downstream… Depending on how the enemy reacts, the canoe team can be converted from a diversion into the main attack…」
What he said was just a fraction of his thoughts. Miara was scared just imagining how much he compartmentalized his mind.
「… At the same time, we will launch an all out attack on the river base… Aside from normal cannons, we will also use the giant cannons. The attack will be launched in concert with the troops upstream and downstream. Will the enemy retreat before it falls…? No, the river base is a key point for the second half of the war. It's hard to imagine them not fighting to the last here. How should I…」
Jean kept mumbling, but the voice of his subordinate cut off his train of thought.
「── Commander, a report! An enemy cavalry unit has crossed the shallow parts of the river upstream! They are about one company strong!」
The moment she heard that news, Miara looked confused.
「Their cavalry there is crossing on their own initiative──?」
「… Even if they want to attack the branch supply line… It's hard to accomplish that with just one company. Did they see us crafting boats near the river, and came over to stop us? It's an unexpected timing for an attack, but…」
Even Jean couldn't fathom the intention behind that move. After a slight hesitation, he turned to his adjutant and said:
「…Miara, inform the commander of the boat crafting unit, tell them to stay on their guard.」
「Y-Yes Sir!」
Miara wanted to open a communication channel immediately. But another subordinate yelled at this moment:
「── Commander, a report! The enemy is building a bridge downstream!」
Even Jean stared with his eyes wide at that. He remained still. Miara stopped using the Sprite for communication and said puzzledly:
「B-Bridge? At this point in time?」

Jean felt the same way. It’s obvious that the Kioka army wanted to cross the river, but he couldn’t fathom what the Imperial army was trying to do. Jean asked:
「... How’s their progress?」
「They are about 20% finished, but considering when they started, that’s really fast. According to the scouts, they used a building techniques unknown in Kioka...」
「Building techniques unknown to us… No, that’s not important. Why are they building a bridge there? If they want to cross the river, they don’t need to spend so much effort… A well planned diversion? Are they using the bridge as bait to divide our forces? No, that man knows I won’t fall for that kind of bait...」
Jean thought further in an attempt to discern the enemy’s intentions. And that made him bothered about the earlier report.
「... Matching this timing with the cavalry crossing upstream? The bridge isn’t a bait, but a lifeline for them to escape from enemy grounds? If so, that company of cavalry will cut across our supply line. Can one company move so boldly? I-Impossible——」
「...Field Marshal, what’s the point of your orders?」
At the same time, in a different location. Inside the Imperial headquarters, Major Megu questioned the youth about sending cavalry across the river and building a bridge downstream.
「The point? There’s no point.」
When Ikuta answered plainly, Major Megu was shocked.
「W-What did you say...?」
「There’s really no point. Sending the cavalry across the river upstream, building a bridge downstream, and letting the enemy observe both actions at the same time, there is no point in any of that—— However, Jean won’t think so. He will keep thinking with his brilliant mind, and try to make sense of it.」
Ikuta said with a malicious tone. After accepting all that, Major Megu continued:
「Anyway, it’s a diversion to make the enemy commander make the wrong decision?」
「That’s not possible, our opponent isn’t cute enough to make mistakes over something like this. He will think and think again, and pick the best answer after considering all possibilities.」
「Then why...」
Ikuta looked at the confused adjutant and smiled boldly:
「I guess, it’s to tell that guy that only I can play such a chess move?」
「... I’m really grateful that we can get hot meals almost every time.」
Sarihasrag muttered as he looked down at the steaming soup in his hands——
In a different base 20km upstream from Sazarf’s position. The enemy was right across the river, and they were having a meal before the battle started in earnest.

「I agree. The enemy is tough── but we can fight a better war compared to the Northern Unrest or the military coup.」
Suya said as she shoved stew meat and vegetables into her mouth. Sushuraf who was munching on steamed yam nodded quietly. A figure approached them at this moment.
「My work feels meaningful when I hear you say that.」
The familiar gentle voice reached their ears. They turned and saw Haro with a medic armband holding a tray.
「Major Becker? What are you doing in the frontlines?」
「I'm here to check on everyone, and to see whether the Ikuta doctrine is running smoothly on the grounds. Oh, please have some tea.」
She squatted down, and offered her tray to the three of them. They brought the tea to their mouths with a puzzled look.
「Oh… So sweet.」「There's a lot of sugar.」
「Fufu, I wanted to try realizing a dream I had during the Northern Unrest. I think this tea should be served to those who work the hardest.」
Haro stuck out her tongue mischievously. She looked at their faces in turn, then turned to the officers eating around them, and said:
「Not too tense or too relaxed… Everyone's faces look good.」
When they heard that, the three looked at each other. Sarihasrag gently rolled his shoulders.
「Now that you mentioned it… Compared to the tough campaigns, my body feels lighter this time.」
「That's right, my men said the same thing. Especially the old timers, they said this is the first time they had a war that didn't make any unnecessary actions.」
Suya said and suddenly turned to Haro.
「… A relaxed war is the correct way to fight a war, is that what he means?」
「As expected of his disciple. That's right── this is how a war directed by Ikuta-san is like. The communication Sprite is also a big help, but that's only supplementary support. If that person didn't nurture his idea, it wouldn't have been realized.」
Haro said with respect. Sarihasrag snorted.
「Measly tricks to slack off that troubles his superiors to no end, and he researched it into an ideal condition when fighting wars? …Was Toruru drawn in by that too? Damn it, that Field Marshal really piss me off.」
The eldest son of house Remeon downed the tea in one go as if he was venting his anger. Haro stood up with a smile.
「I'm going to the next site. I think the battle here will be intense… I hope everyone can stay safe.」
When they heard that, the three of them saluted, and Haro returned their salute.
On the other hand, in a base downstream from Sazarf's position. General Shiba led the defences here, repelling the Kioka forces swarming at the point where the river turned narrow.

「── Hmm.」
General Shiba muttered as he looked towards the rear with his telescope. An incoming cavalry unit from their home territory entered into his field of vision.
「The roving unit has returned── let them in!」
His men scattered on his command, and the cavalry streamed into the base. General Shiba walked over and greeted the vermillion-haired general who didn’t seem tired at all.
「Good work, Honorary Field Marshal Sir. You have done outstanding work.」
「Call me the guerilla captain, General Shiba. And you don’t need to call me Sir, that will confuse the chain of command.」
Solvenares advised coldly. His tired men behind him dismounted wobbilily.
「Huff」! Puff」!」「Oh」 We are finally here...」「Help me tie up my horse...」
They assisted a few retreating units on their way here, and accomplished more results compared to other units. Solvenares told his exhausted men the order they had been waiting for:
「You have performed splendidly. Everyone, rest well until 0700 tomorrow.」
「We have prepared enough beds for all of you over there. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to tell the medic.」
「I’m gonna get my beauty sleep──!」
Niam ran off with the other riders right behind her. General Shiba burst out laughing.
「Hahaha! Your subordinates are really lively.」
He turned to the vermillion-haired general after laughing out loud, then looked into his eyes and said:
「You must be tired too── I will take care of everything else, do rest up in the tent.」
「Understood, you have my thanks.」
General Shiba looked at that figure walking towards the tent with those curt words.
「I never thought I would fight alongside Solvenares at this age… The battlefield has gotten so interesting, Hasa, why aren’t you here with me?」
He looked up to the sky with a grunt before looking down again.
「Anyway, the guerilla team needs to have a good rest──」
At dawn, the Kioka army attacked all the bases along the river in force.
「── Start the shelling!」
The rows of Blast Cannons spew fire at the same time, and the shells rained down on the trenches where the Imperial soldiers were taking cover.
Sensing the tremors from the ground, Sazarf issued the order to return fire.
「They are attacking for real...! Engage, we will bombard them too!」
The cannons spread out behind the trenches started firing in retaliation at the enemy. Everything so far was similar to the opening battle, but the developments differed a lot
「Enemy units sighted crossing with canoes at point C upstream! We need more soldiers! Please send reinforcements!」

「Got it, I will send them right now, hold out until then!」
Sazarf sent the closest unit over, and answered the reinforcements request he received. Major Sarihasrag and General Shiba should be making similar arrangements── however, shortly after the battle ensued, the enemy attacks suddenly intensified.
「Reporting! Enemy unit sighted at point O downstream!」「Enemy unit is pushing canoes into the water at Point E upstream──」
「Again? How did they prepare so many canoes in such a short period of time…!」
Sazarf clicked his tongue at the unexpectedly busy workload. A new notification hit him again.
「Reporting! Enemy balloon unit sighted at point C upstream──!」
The air invasion has finally started. Sazarf ordered without hesitation:
「Send over the reserves! Hound them until they reach their landing spot!」
「Yes Sir!」
To suppress the Air Troopers, a large number of troops were sent over. They couldn't let the balloon land. Sazarf could imagine the deployment of his troops getting more difficult with time, and smiled with a cramped face── then one of his subordinates shouted a more direct threat:
「The Kioka infantry is crossing the river by force──!」
「… Huff! Puff!…」
「Don't panic and keep your head down!」「Keep your shoulders submerged, and advance with your waist bent…!」
The enemy watched as they stepped into the river. Sergeant Major Mita crossed her arms as she observed her troops staying low and advancing as one.
「── The methods of crossing a river to attack have changed a lot. What I learned was to charged with all our might.」
「That is possible if the water is less than knee deep. But we can't sprint in this depth. And if we rush them, some might slip and drown.」
Harrah beside her added. New tactics were implemented gradually, and their leader Jean would naturally keep himself updated.
「Furthermore── I learned from Professor Anarai that water is a surprisingly good defence against bullets. The bullets will stop less than 1 metre in water. In order words, the soldiers can hide themselves in the water.」
「Oh」 Is that so」」
「It's true. Submerged until shoulder level, take care not to slip, and keep pace with the others and advance. After reaching the other bank, sprint at full speed. The key is to maintain discipline before reaching the other bank.」
Sergeant Major Mita listened carefully as she observed the battle. However, her point of view differed from Harrah. As her rank of Sergeant Major suggested, Mita Kenshi held the perspective of the soldiers soaked in the river, so her view on things differed from an officer. That was why Harrah kept her with him even after he was promoted to Major.

「The enemy will split their forces to deal with the canoes and balloons, if we keep this up, we can break through sooner or later… but we will need to make a lot of sacrifices, right? I don't think our general will agree to a plan of filling up the river bed with the corpses of our troops.」
Sergeant Major Mita looked sharply at her superior. Questioning things was her job, and the buff officer accepted her gaze.
「Don't worry, that won't happen. We can't allow too many sacrifices── But our opponents are even more desperate to hold on to their base. Because there aren't any better defence bases along the route to the capital. And so── once they realized the base will fall with time, they will have to take other measures.」
「… Other measures?」
「You'll know soon, just watch.」
「… The enemy's bombardment is too intense, and has evened out the terrain advantage we have at the river.」
A day and a half after the battle ensured, Sazarf muttered as he surveyed his base's defences. How long can he keep up his defences── he could tell at this stage that he couldn't last long enough.
「We can't last long by just defending… We have to wait for the right moment to make our move, huh?」
Sazarf clenched his fists. If a steady way of fighting couldn't bring about the result he wanted, then he had to take a risk and use an unorthodox method. Having made his resolve, he turned and ordered his men.
「Tell the cavalry to stand by!」
「Damn it! At least stop the bombardment when they send in their infantry…!」
「Don't stop firing back! If we don't pick them off in the water, it will be bad!」
The Imperial soldiers poked their guns out of the trenches and continued firing. They felt frustrated that the enemies in the water were hard to hit, and the frustration threw their aiming off further. In a different sense from the Kioka soldiers braving the river crossing, they were exhausting their mental endurance too── The bombardment fell mercilessly onto the trenches. A corner of the trenches collapsed, and a crater blew up there.
「It's the giant cannon again…! The adjacent sector is buried, send help!」
「We are tied up just from engaging the enemy! Send us the reserves!」
Recovering the wounded and repairing the trenches took up manpower, and the density of retaliatory fire dropped. The Kioka soldiers in the water could see that too.
「Yes, we are gaining momentum…!」 「We can crush them if we keep this up! Charge!」
The leading elements had crossed 3 quarters of the river, and the depth only reached up to their waist. They were no longer hunched over, sprinting along the slippery river bed. The Imperial soldiers realized that the enemy would rush into their trenches and fix on bayonets.

「Now── start the charge!」
At that moment, the well prepared Sazarf gave his order. The cavalry standing by at the front trenches charged up a ramp and onto the bridge that was separated from the intense battle. When the Kioka soldiers saw the cavalry charging towards their base, they stared with their eyes wide open with shock.
「What!? The cavalry is charging across the bridge──?」
「Oh no, they are flanking to our rear! There's no way our backlines are ready to defend against a cavalry charge──」
The Kioka soldiers realized the reason the enemy left that bridge untouched── it's for this surprise counterattack. With their attention on the enemy opposite the river, Kioka was not prepared for the cavalry charging at full speed──
「No. We are prepared for this.」
── Something like that would never happen to a unit led by Jean Arkinex. Aim at the gunners on the bridge from an unassuming angle, then use crossfire to hit the approaching cavalry. The horse and men fell onto the bridge.
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crossfire
>
「A bridge that would be blown up if we attempt to cross it── it's something that will make us anxious, but not so for the opponent. Because it's a direct route to attack us as they please.」
Harrah raised the corner of his lips. Things were turning out just like Jean advised him.
「Making us assume that this is a one sided defence battle, and when we send most of our troops to cross the river, they will charge with their cavalry and bite our throat. This is an excellent plan. If I'm in command, I might fall for it. However──」
Before his eyes, the cavalry was losing momentum under the crossfire, and the riders were stuck behind them on the bridge. Some of them realized the plan had failed and wanted to turn around, but it was hard for many horses to turn on the narrow bridge.
「── This plan is unexpectedly shallow against the Insomniac Brilliant General. It's pitiful, but the commander has to pay the price for the failure of your tactics.」
Harrah muttered and ordered his foot soldiers to attack. They didn't cross the river, and were running towards the bridge choked by the cavalry.
「No matter what way we use to cross the river, the bridge will be destroyed… However, there are cases where you can't demolish it. For example── when your comrades are on the bridge.」
This was the risk of using an unorthodox tactic── a golden opportunity to use the normally unusable bridge had presented itself.

「I heard that you are respected by your subordinates and takes great care of them── do you have the resolve to abandon your comrades, Mr Senpa Sazarf?」
「── They saw through us──」
Sazarf stared with his eyes wide open. Lieutenant Colonel Melza's shout pierced through his back.
「Brigadier General Sir! The enemy is crossing the bridge! If this continues──」
That snapped him back to reality── That's right, now wasn't the time to daze off. He had to take measures to minimize his losses, that's the obligation of an officer.
「... F-Fire... the bridge.....」
The words got caught in his throat. If they blow up the bridge now, the people on the bridge would get killed from the colatorial damage. He needed to bury the cavalry who believed in him and got on the bridge── and pay the price for his failed tactics.
「... Ughh...!」
He couldn't make a sound, as if there was lead inside his throat. Senpa Sazarf's body was resisting against that order. However── However, he had to execute it. If the enemy crossed the bridge, the losses they would suffer would be on an entirely different level. There really was a line when an officer had to give up, and it was clear to everyone that the situation had come to this.
「── I-I'm sorry──」
The fear made Sazarf's teeth chatter. However, his sense of responsibility didn't allow him to hesitate any longer. He was about to make the painful order to abandon his allies── but the sound of shelling sounded out a second earlier.
「── Huh?」
Sazarf shouted stiffly. The part of the bridge closest to the opposite bank had collapsed.
In a corner of the trench some distance away from Sazarf. An officer standing before the cannons that had been aiming at the bridge all this while opened a Sprite communication channel.
「── This is Metrache Lance. I ordered a shelling on my own initiative.」
She reported to her superiors through the Sprite. There wasn't any answer from the connected channel, only silence. She paid it no mind and continued her explanation:
「Many of our wounded are on the bridge, so I only aimed at the enemy end of the bridge. About a third of the bridge has collapsed... The foundations of the bridge is separated into three parts when it was constructed, so it shouldn't collapse further if we stop further bombardment.」
──Focus bombardment to destroy only one part of the bridge── She made that snap decision to realize her fleeting idea. She knew she was out of line, but instead of leaving her comrades to their demise── or letting Lieutenant

Colonel Melza’s record become tarnished from that, it would be better for her to be court martialed.
「It is obvious that the responsibility lies with me alone. I’m will accept any punishment, please don’t blame the artillery men――」
「**Great！！Well done!**」
The Sprite shook from the joyous cries of her two superior officers. The reaction that ran contrary to what she expected made First Lieutenant Lance open her mouth wide.
「―― They only aimed at one part of the bridge and demolished that?」
Harrah, who was watching from the opposite bank, had a cramped face.
「How troubling. What a flexible response in this crucial moment. Is Senpa Sazarf smarter than I expected? Or… is the officer in charge of their Blast Cannons exceptionally capable?」
Harrah muttered as he scratched the back of his head. High ranking enemy officers aside, he didn’t even know the first of the enemy junior officers. But he knew that such things happen occasionally. All famous generals started out as unknown officers after all.
「Hey！」
Sergeant Major Mita grabbed the back of Harrah’s head with both palms.
「Now isn’t the time to reflect on the points of failure! Like you said, if the tactic fails, the commander has to pay the price!」
「―― That’s true, you are right.」
Harrah returned his attention to the current situation. Like Sazarf, he had the obligations of an officer too.
「Time won’t turn back even if we regret it. Fire all the giant cannons, commit all our reserves―― we will capture the enemy base with our full forces!」
While an intense battle was playing out in Sazarf’s defence base, the two forces faced off against each other downstream where General Shiba was in charge.
「... When the enemy is focused on Brigadier General Sazarf’s position, if the opportunity present itself, send the troops to attack the enemy’s rear―― that was the plan, but...」
General Shiba said with a serious face. He looked at the Kioka soldiers deployed along the opposite bank. They were in tidy formation without showing any openings.
「The enemy before us is on guard, and won’t let us do that… They seemed confident that we aren’t just a diversion. If we get greedy, we might get wiped out instead.」
「Indeed.」
The vermillion-haired general behind him concurred. General Shiba said to the man behind him:
「Rest in the tents for now, guerilla captain… no matter which way the tide leans, we will need you.」
「……」

Ikuta who was in the headquarters receiving reports from all the battlefields had a serious expression.
「... All our units are fighting valiantly. The question is, how long can we hold out...」
Major Megu said with a low tone. A new notification came in at this moment, and the youth answered── the sound of an intense firefight rang out.
「── This is Sarihasrag! Can you hear me? We have been attacked from the rear! Send reinforcements! The enemy is one battalion in strength!」
The eldest son of house Remeon spoke urgently. Ikuta gestured to Major Megu with his eyes, and answered as calmly as possible:
「My adjutant is arranging the reinforcements. I want to confirm, the enemy came from your rear? Did they crossed the river?」
「They came from behind! From what I can see, they didn't cross the river! They suddenly appeared from downstream! I could have engaged them properly if I had early warning, what are the guys watching the river doing!?」
Sariha's grumble made Ikuta realize everything. Since there wasn't any contact from the observation post, the reason was clear.
「The signalman has probably been taken out... It's the Phantom.」
「── It has been exposed. Pull out.」
「Mmm, mmm...」
The Phantom standing before the tied and gagged Imperial soldier said quietly with a Sprite in his hand. That wasn't his Sprite. He had threatened the signalman, forcing him to send false reports all this while.
「How useless... After spending so much time, less than 30 of us made it through to the enemy's rear. It will be hard to support our allies with just this numbers.」
He lamented with a sigh. They broke through the tight defences by swimming across the river, but that was a last resort. They should have flanked to the enemy's rear earlier── if not for the fearsome hunters blocking their paths.
「Because of them, how many of the 800 strong units had fallen...? We have less than a hundred survivors.」
The captain's words made the Phantoms around him hang their heads with their fists clenched... No matter the outcome of this war, the Phantom Unit's fate was sealed. They could clearly tell that their existence would disappear through the cracks of the rapid torrent of history.
「But we still fulfilled the minimum requirement of our mission── take a good look, Imperials, this is the final claw marks from the Phantoms.」
「...! Sorry, Ik-kun. We can't block the enemy's infiltration completely...」
The jade-eyed youth's voice was transmitted through the Sprite. Ikuta rebuked the bitter apology without any hesitation.

「Don’t be daft. If they had to use the roundabout trick of switching out the signalman, that means they failed to infiltrate with a large group. It’s wrong to say that you failed to block their infiltration completely— instead, you made the best of a bad situation.」
Ikuta merely stated a fact, and wasn’t trying to console him. Since he had a limited number of troops to defend a wide area of operation, it was impossible to completely block the Phantom's infiltration from the start. Even so, the hunters still came close to achieving the impossible. Torway had nothing to apologize for.
「After taking serious casualties in their battle with you, the Phantom is rendered ineffective as a fighting unit… But they still stubbornly carried out their mission, which is frankly impressive to me.」
「……」
「Honorary Field Marshal Igsem’s unit is heading to relieve Major Sarihasrag’s position right now. The Remeon brothers should be able to hold out until they arrive. Suya is there too.」
「…Yes!」
After Torway squeezed out a cheerful reply, they ended the call. With the battle as dangerous as walking on a tight wire, Torway couldn’t spare the time to worry about his brothers. It was the same for Ikuta, he could only hope they could last until reinforcement reached them. Most importantly— the biggest risk he would take was coming up soon.
「… Which unit should I withdraw at which timing? Yatori, would you know the answer?」

Two hours after requesting for reinforcements, Sarihasrag's unit continued fending off the assault on their trench. The design of the trench made it possible to defend against enemy attacks from the rear, but the battle was still tough when the attack happened.

「Shyaa──!」「Hyaa!」

Both sides fought within shooting range. Soldiers would fall with every exchange of gunfire. Even so, they still fought off the 5th wave of attack.

Sarihasrag shouted with a Wind Gun affixed with a bayonet:

「Don't falter! Raise your weapons! Beat off the enemy!」

He rallied his troops, but they were gradually losing steam from the consecutive battles. The elder brother could sense that they were close to defeat. His younger brother, Sushuraf, who had finished tallying the casualty approached him.

「... Twelve more died after the last wave of attack. We are almost at our limits, big brother.」

「Phew」... I know! Ah」 damn it, am I to fight a muddy melee battle despite being a field-grade officer!?」

To avoid losing himself to fear and anxiety, Sariha intentionally grumbled pointlessly. After the mock battle with Ikuta and the intense battle during the civil war, he finally learned self restraint. On the other hand, the unfazed Suya calmly analyzed the situation:

「We requested for reinforcement three hours ago. Even if the closest cavalry unit rush here at top speed, it will still take 30 more minutes.」

Contrary to the contents of her words, she wasn't anxious or fearful.

Concerned about her attitude, Sariha asked:

「... Hey, First Lieutenant Mittokarifu.」

「Yes?」

「Aren't you scared?」

He asked frankly. Suya turned stiff for an instant, then answered as if it didn't concern her:

「Well── surprisingly, I'm not really scared. Because I had done my very best, and can accept it even if it ended like this.」

She said as she reloaded her crossbow on reflex with a dry smile.

「Actually── I'm a little expectant.」

「... Expectant?」

「I wonder what kind of face that person will make when he learns of my demise? ──Because… That's probably the only way I can make his soul waver.」

That answer made Sariha silent for a few seconds before sighing heavily.

「... I have noticed for some time now that your mentality is really twisted.」

「None of your business. Why don't you lose your cool in a more exaggerated manner, Major? Like that time during the mock battle.」

Suya’s retort hit the mark. The eldest son of house Remeon was twitching the corners of his lips slightly.
「... I have decided. Even if I die here, I will not die before you do.」
「Is that so? ──Oh, I just thought of an amazing plan. Major, you can charge out of the enemy trench alone, tank around a thousand bullets, and we will use this chance to escape. How’s that for a plan?」
She retaliated. Sariha wanted to respond with sarcasm, but laughed when he thought of something.
「... I see, disciple huh?」
「Hmm?」
「Don’t you realize that your choice of words is exactly the same as Solork?」
Suya blushed beet red. Her eyes continued watching for enemy movements, but she refuted with an intense tone:
「We are not similar in the slightest! Please retract that before you die, Major!」
「Who will retract that, retard『! Wondering what kind of face he will make when you die!? Such a gloomy passion! Oh, really now, I have never felt so revolting! If you are that bothered, then spend a night with him, coward!』
「Sigh── As expected of a pretty boy, the things you say are different too! What a shame that the youngest son took away all the other good points!」
「What! Arrghh...! Damn it, that completely crossed the line! I will punch you if you do that again!」
「Come at me, bro『! Don’t hold back, you can use your windgun too! I won’t lose to a delinquent in a fight!』
They bickered noisily as they suppressed the enemy with their gunfire, which made the subordinates around them slack jawed. Watching the wacky scene in the face of destruction── Sushuraf showed a rare smile.
「... Hah...」
His men nodded at his gaze. Sushuraf was holding a large scatter shot Wind Gun, and stood with his hands on the trench with his platoon.
「...Huh? Hey, Sushuraf?『『Wait── What are you doing, Captain Sushuraf!?』
The two of them asked confusedly. Sushuraf answered with a smile:
「I’m accepting your proposal, First Lieutenant Mittokarifu. We will charge the enemy to divert the enemy’s attention, while you and my brother will escape in the opposite direction. It will be difficult to tank a thousand bullets── but we can buy some time.」
When he heard what his little brother said, Sariha smiled troubledly.
「W-What are you saying, Sushuraf...? Squat down, it’s dangerous to raise your head, given how buff you are...」
Lifting a hand to stop his elder brother, the second son of house Remeon continued:
「Keep that girl by your side, big brother. I might be nagging a little, but she will push your life in the right direction… and do so far better than me.」
「── No, like I said, what are you──」

Even so, Sariha still couldn’t accept what his younger brother said and reached for his shoulder. Sushuraf gently brushed that hand away and thought about the past.
— You’re really bad with words. With your big body and poker face, no one will dare approach you. Can’t you relax the muscles on your face a little?

They were a pair of dissimilar brothers— the elder was talkative and frivolous, while the younger was crude and silent. He had a big stature, but always followed behind his older brother.
— Ah… never mind, it’s my fault for forcing you… Sigh, you don’t have to force a smile when it isn’t funny. I will mediate things for you, since we are always together.

When he realized it, they were always together. They grew up in the same family, studied in the same school, and after joining the army, he was more worried about his elder brother than his younger brother. He knew that his younger brother would find his own path given time, while the elder brother was still troubled about his future.
— Don’t worry. When a younger brother is troubled, you will see the back of your elder brother standing in front of you—

He wasn’t worried any more. After experiencing many failures, his brother was walking forward despite his unstable steps. His brother had gained the strength to stand up again even if he fell. The back of his brother was broad and reliable, just like what he saw during their childhood.
“— Bye, bro.”
—Sushuraf called him a term he hadn’t used for years. He pushed away the hand trying to grab his shoulders, climbing swiftly out of the trench, exposing himself to the enemy— For the first time, he was glad for his buff body. The bigger the target, the easier he could draw attention.
“—Sushuraf□□□!”
His elder brother called out his name. Sushuraf Remeon didn’t turn back, following his men in their charge towards the enemy.
“Ohhhhh!□□Ammo, bring me ammo!”
“Sector two got hit by the giant cannon, there are many casualties!□□He’s not breathing! Medic□!”
Sazarf’s trenches finally made it through the on and off attack from the bridges with stubborn defences. However, this battle was nearing its end.
“… We have suffered more than 30% casualties, Brigadier General.”
“……”
Lieutenant Colonel Melza’s words made him grit his teeth. At this moment, his partner in his pouch notified him of a call, and Sazarf answered immediately:
“…Senpa Sazarf here.”

This is Ikuta Solork… I'm sorry, but the enemy broke through two spots upstream. You will be surrounded soon, please withdraw immediately.
The order to withdraw was given officially. Sazarf thought it was time the order came.
… No, I refuse.
He said with a low voice. The dark-haired youth answered a few seconds later:
— I'm sorry, I didn't get that. Say again.
I won't retreat. No, I will arrange for most of the troops to withdraw, but me and my reserve unit will stay behind. I should be able to fight a few more hours—
Sazarf declared with a firm tone. Ikuta's stiff voice came through the Sprite:
…Brigadier General Sazarf, keep your jokes in check.
Did it sound like a joke?
His firm voice showed how determined he was. The youth's voice started to tremble:
… Really now… Spare me from that. We can't waste any time, even if we commit all our reserves to support the retreat, it's uncertain if we can shake off their pursuit.
That's exactly why we need someone to delay the enemy. I will hold out here, and let as many soldiers return safely as I can. Since I'm commanding the frontlines, this is my job—
I don't want you to die!
The youth's roar echoed out, and his subordinates turned to see what happened. Ikuta wasn't hiding his anxiety any longer and his words came out quicker as time passes:
Hurry, please retreat right now! You get it right, I didn't order you to defend to the last! Abandon the base and withdraw once you reach your limits! The biggest priority is to let the troops reach the next defence line alive! I have told you time and again, that is the Ikuta doctrine!
Ikuta insisted on his position as a Field Marshal, which made Sazarf smile faintly.
…Yes. I'm doing this on my own discretion.
……!
There are no doctrines about ignoring orders and starting a battle. You are free to summon a court martial after this— I'm hanging up.
Wait! Please wait…!
The youth was pleading now. Ikuta started ranting, his unsteady tone wasn't like his usual self.
I-It can't be helped then— I will let you in on the truth. Actually, I have a secret plan, and everything has been within my expectations. I already prepared a trap to wipe out the enemy that will pursue you. In fact, you will be troubling me by staying behind— Ah really now,

what a pain□ You are bad at reading the mood some times, Brigadier General—□
Sazarf smiled awkwardly. Thinking back on how much of a cunning linguist Ikuta was, that sounded as if he forgot to oil his tongue.
□Yes, I know… that is the worst lie you ever told in your life.□
□— Ughh—!□
□I know you are not completely helpless, but there isn't a convenient plan to wipe out the enemy… I know that much at the very least. I had been trained as a high ranking officer after all.□
The man said with a gentle tone. This was the longest silence in their conversation.
□— Adult—□
□…?□
□— There aren't any adults.□
Ikuta stammered. The youth said one word at a time, as if he was opening his heart.
□My father died, and my mother also passed away. After joining the army and becoming a member of the Knights Corp with everyone, I don't have any □adults□ by my side. There isn't a reliable figure aside from my comrades… A senior who guide us as their juniors.□
□……□
□I had never held expectations. The battlefield isn't a place where you can take care of others… Especially the Northern Unrest, that was a terrible war. In that environment, it took everything we had just to take care of ourselves.
But you are different. You listened carefully to us rookie Warrant Officers that others looked down on, and fought alongside us. You even bow your head to request a superior to grant our request. In that hell— to me, you are the only reliable □adult□.□
Even if it was just one person, having a reliable elder by their side was a big salvation to them back then.
□I— don't want you to die.□
He didn't have any strategy, and has abandoned his judgement as a commander. Sazarf could see the youth on the other side of the Sprite showing a face that befitted his age.
□… Thank you.□
He thought back on his meeting with Ikuta Solork and the □Knights Corp□, and what he gained from that experience, and thanked him.
□Because I met with you all— I have become a more decent adult.□
It all ends here… When his career reached a deadend in the Northern Territorries, he had half given up on life. And now, Senpa Sazarf realized that he didn't hate himself anymore.
□Please wait! Wait—□
Sazarf one sidedly cut off the call. He was afraid that he would change his mind if he heard anymore.

…Sir…
Melza who heard the conversation walked over quietly. Sazarf turned and told her immediately:
Organize the unit and retreat, Lieutenant Colonel Melza. Like what you heard, I will take care of this place.
Seeing his eyes filled with determination, Melza shook her head with a smile:
… Leave that to First Lieutenant Lance. I will stay here.
I won't allow it, Lieutenant Colonel, this is an order.
Sazarf tried very hard to make mix in his personal feelings and ordered his adjutant again. However— Melza shrugged as if she was looking at a wilful child.
Ignoring orders and booking a court martial in advance— How much authority do you think your orders hold, Brigadier General Senpa Sazarf?
Ughh—
He couldn't refute that. When Sazarf thought about how to convince her, but Melza leaned towards him and said:
I'm your adjutant. I taught you how to act like a high ranking officer. In my eyes, your decision is correct.
And that is why I will be happy to accompany you till the end… Isn't that the ideal stance of an adult, and the responsibility of those who lead others?
Melza said without any gloom in her eyes. They looked at each other for a moment, and Sazarf lowered his head in surrender.
… You are always like this. Always going through with your reasons cooly, with no regards for my feelings.
And he liked her because she was such a person. And that was why he wanted her to live. However, Sazarf understood in his heart. Someone like her would never leave him behind.
I have always respected you— so, I will confirm one last time.
Are you fine dying by my side?
Sazarf asked with all the sincerity he could muster. Melza replied with a salute:
I'm fine with that. Whether I die in a few hours, or fifty year later— that will be the place for me.
Her fastball reply embodied her style. His heart was filled with ease and happiness, which made Sazarf feel dizzy.
… Like I say, that's foul play.
Sorry, but I like your bashful face.
Melza said with a smile. Her reliable smile made Sazarf smile too. He felt that staying beside a strong woman until the end was the best way to finish his life.
Alright then, let's get started.
… Yes!
They nodded to each other and headed side by side into the base. They chose to fight a good battle on this battlefield.

Chapter 3: The Result of the Deadly Battle

Around twelve hours after losing contact with Sazarf, Ikuta received news that the Kioka forces were crossing the river.

「F-Field Marshal Sir――」

Major Megu couldn't find the words to console the silent youth hanging his head in front of the Sprite. After a long silence, Ikuta moved his lips a little.

「... It will be fine..... It will be fine.」

The youth said as if to convince himself, then took a deep breath before exhaling. He repeated that action, forcefully changing his mood to that of a Field Marshal.

「We will be moving the stage to the final line of defence. Contact General Remeon.」

「Y-Yes Sir!」

Major Megu started making the call at her own desk. Ikuta was ready to make a call when Kusu notified him of an incoming communication from the vermillion haired general.

「This is Solvenares Igsem. We have just rescued the surrounded allies upstream.」

The youth opened his eyes wide. The allies surrounded upstream―― that was Major Sarihasrag's unit.

「Did you succeed?」

「We managed to break them out of the encirclement, but they suffered heavy casualties. Including KIA, MIA and captives, they lost around 40% of their troops. We are still tabulating the detailed numbers.」

「... What about the casualties to the officers?」

Ikuta thought about the worst scenario and asked. Solvenares answered immediately:

「The unit commander, Major Sarihasrag Remeon, is safe. First Lieutenant Suya Mittokarifu from the same sector is unscathed. However...」

He was relieved that they were safe, but unease swirled in his heart as a name that should come between them was missing.

…Captain Sushuraf Remeon is heavily wounded. He launched a feint attack to cover his comrades retreat, right before we arrived. He got hit three times in the chest and leg. We sent him urgently to a field hospital, but it will be up to him if he can make it through.
…I see… How's Major Sarihasrag?
……
Solvenares kept the channel with Ikuta open as he looked behind him. Facing his younger brother laying beside the group of injured, their commander crumpled onto the floor.
…Major, are you alright?
Suya approaching from behind said cautiously. Sariha muttered to her:
…Toruru, and now Sushuraf… why are my brothers so eager to rush into danger? Why are they rushing to their death like fools? Just stay behind your older brother…!
The man's shoulders trembled from regret and self loath. He then said something to the woman behind him:
…Hey, why are you so quiet?
Huh?
Talk smack. Say something── that it's shameful to be protected by your little brother, and it's a disgrace that you can't even take revenge.
The unexpected request made Suya cross her arms in deep thought. After hesitating for a minute, she said without much confidence:
Your… taste in casual clothes sucks.
Why are you bringing that up now!?
Sariha stood up suddenly in front of her. Suya held her hands up and backed off.
No, because…! Cheering and consolation aside, I don't know how to talk smack to someone who got depressed because his brother is gravely injured!
Who asked you to console me!? I don't care what it is, do something to wake me up!
Suya finally understood his request after hearing that, and slowly raised her right hand.
… Can I use this?
Seeing Suya take a stance, Sariha snorted and turned his cheek towards her. Taking that action as his consent, she slapped with all her might── after taking that blow, Sariha's body bent at a 45 degree angle and collapsed onto the ground.
M-Major──?Hey, he fell over at an awful angle!
Oh no! I accidentally used open palm strike…!
The unexpectedly heavy blow made Suya turn pale. However, her worries were in vain. Sariha laid sprawled on the ground with a smile on his face.
Ha, haha… I-It's not effective at all!
He yelled before jumping up on his feet. This blow might be a strong dose of medicine that managed to cheer him up, or he was putting on a facade── no

matter what, Sariha had reverted to his face of an officer, and said to his subordinate before him:
「First Lieutenant Mittokarifu! Due to the urgency of war, you will be an acting Captain, and serve as my deputy in Sushuraf's stead! Any problems!?」
「Huh? Y-Yes Sir.」
Suya saluted on reflex. Sariha walked passed her with a huff, then said as if he just remembered something:
「And I want to correct one thing!— My taste in clothes is fine!」
As if he was observing the condition of the subject in question, Solvenares paused for a moment before answering Ikuta's question:
「... He doesn't seem to be disheartened. From the looks of things, he should be able to continue working as an officer.」
「... I see... Big bro Sariha is really strong.」
Ikuta said quietly. He ended his call with the vermillion haired general, and turned to the map.
「... They finally reached here. huh?」
「— We are finally here. Finally time for the final phase, Miara.」
Jean said with a face of excitement. He looked down at the map before him, where a few chess pieces had crossed the river and was pressing towards the capital.
「Since their strongest defence base has been broken through, the Imperials can't retreat any more.」
「Yes...!」
Miara nodded firmly. The closer they got to the capital, the more desperate the enemy's resistance. They could only end this war by completely suppressing them.
「After breaking into the center of the Empire, our advance routes will be more diversified and more complicated... We have been trying to flank to the enemy's rear, but from now on, the enemy will attempt the same thing... It's obvious that they can't keep an orthodox battle up for long. That guy must have more tricks up his sleeves.」
「... We can't let our guard down.」
「For me, the most important thing is to guard the supply line... Penetrating deep into enemy territory gives us great opportunities as well as risk. If our supply line from home gets cut off, the situation will be turned on its head. We can't afford to be careless.」
Jean intentionally warned himself to not overestimate his advantage. He had decided to only relax after Kioka's flag flew over the captured Imperial capital.
「Conversely speaking, our victory is assured if they can't cut off our supply lines... And I won't let myself make any mistakes.」
Jean declared heavily, and turned to the Sprites on the table.
「I will continue to direct all the battles— assist me, Miara.」
「— Fire the salvo!」

Bullets flew towards the approaching enemy taking cover in the wheat fields. Behind him is the capital's final defence line── General Terushinha Remeon who was in charge of the defences here felt frustrated.

「So this place has finally turned into a battlefield, huh? ... It's infuriating to see enemy troops in the centre of the Empire.」

In their long war with Kioka, the Empire had never allowed Kioka to penetrate so deep before. This would be the first and final time, the General thought. That was what the final battle meant.

「But I won't let them act as they please. The title of 「Remeon of the Gun」 will be shamed if I only let my sons of the gun take the field」

The general muttered with firm determination. His reputation had already fallen greatly, but he wouldn't allow the family name that his sons would inherit to fall even further. He thought about their three faces in his mind.

「... Don't die before me, Sushuraf...!」

「... Isn't the allotment of duties wrong?」

His heavy words echoed in the battlefield. After receiving news that Brigadier General Sazarf stayed behind and communications with him had been lost, General Shiba experienced a bitter taste he didn't want to feel again.

「Yes── I know nice guys won't last long on the battlefield. Be it Hasa or General Sankrei, they are all the same. War is as malicious as ever.」

They accomplished their duty before passing on. The man had thought for the upteenth time how nice it would be if they died by age order. However, this place wouldn't give them such considerations. General Shiba clenched his fists until his bones creaked.

「... Even then, you are too young for this, Brigadier General Sazarf...!」

He wanted Sazarf to live on. Since this is the final battle, he wanted others to send him off instead. The vexed feelings burning in his chest made him grit his teeth, and he glared at the enemy units spread out before him.

「Kioka soldiers who got sent down this route, you picked the short straw. I'm mad── I have never been so mad since my good friend passed away!」

「... There are a lot more refugees now...」

In the eastern gate of the walls surrounding the Imperial Capital Banhataal. The citizens could see the exhausted crowd queuing to enter the city, and a vague sense of unease was spreading.

「I asked a peddler I'm acquainted with, and heard that the enemy has invaded deep into our territories. I heard they have crossed the big river to the east.」

The enemy was rumoured to be closing in. Unable to sense the reality of this situation, they showed a complicated smile.

「... It will be fine, right? Will they attack the capital...?」

「T-That's right. Those rich merchants aren't fleeing... If they load their riches onto wagons and flee to the west, then things might really be dangerous...」

They stated the reasons to not worry and laughed dryly. To the citizens of the capital, this was a small standard they had set.
「... G-Good, it's all on the wagons.」
In the courtyard of a mansion near the western outskirts of the capital. A man said anxiously as he looked at the fully laden wagons before him. He was a famous wealthy merchant, and one of the standards the citizens were using to gauge the situation.
「We can go at any time. Did you forget anything!?」
The man turned to his wife behind him to check. His two children stood beside his wife, and she was holding a baby with a troubled face.
「No… But do we really have to run? The Empress is still in the capital, right?」
「I already told you plenty of times… I heard from a business partner about the situation at the front lines! This time, we are in a very dire situation! Who knows what will happen in the future, but to be safe──」
The sound of a door opening cut him off. The man turned to look, and saw a blonde girl leading her escort entering. The appearance of the Empress made his heart race.
「── Pardon my intrusion.」
The girl walked over with her eyes staring right at that man, as if she was the owner of this mansion. The man wouldn't let anyone take that attitude in his own house, but he couldn't complain against this person. Because everything in the Empire, including all the wealth he had accumulated, belonged to her.
「Y-Your Majesty...」
「Forgive my sudden visit. I'm paying a visit to all the wealthy merchants in the capital.」
Empress said before looking around her. The man's face started to cramp. It was clear to anyone that they were getting ready to flee under the cover of night.
「Oh, what's going on here? You loaded the furniture and other things onto the wagons, as if you are going off on a journey.」
「Ahh── No, that's──」
He started stammering for an excuse. Chamille already saw through him, and declared coldly:
「... Are you worried about getting caught in the war, and are planning to flee?」
「N-Not at all! We will never think about fleeing the capital where Your Majesty is...!」
The man shook his head desperately to deny her accusation. He could only do that while his head was still connected to his body. The Empress snorted and nodded.
「Good. But your actions might invite misunderstanding. The citizens will watch how you merchants move, so if you don't run, they will think the

situation is still fine. At times like this, you should show them an easy attitude.」
「Yes...!」
The man knelt together with his wife and children. The Empress crossed her arms in satisfaction.
「It's great that you understand── Oh the number of refugees in the city has increased. Why don't you show them your generosity as the wealthy, and distribute food to them?」
「Y-You are right, I will make arrangements right away...!」
「Good. Instead of running away with your possessions, you will gain more by staying behind and contributing to the masses... What kind of reputation will you get with your actions? Be it good or bad, you need to keep that in mind at all times?」
After a stern warning, the Empress left the man's mansion. She got on a horse herself and asked her escort.
「... How many houses left, Lucanti?」
「Eleven. There's around three hours before sunset, we should pick up the pace.」
Lucanti answered swiftly. The Empress looked up at the sun in the sky and nodded lightly.
「Fortunately, we can finish our inspection today. Going around personally is less bothersome than I imagined. There are many wealthy merchants like the 「Godfather of the Market」 Bhada who took measures to avoid any chaos in the capital on their own accord.」
Chamille said as she pulled on the reins. She confirmed her duty again in her mind.
「Feed the refugees, don't let the flow of goods stall, and stop the citizens in the capital from rioting because of unease? The troops are fighting on the frontlines, so I won't ever say that this is a difficult task...──」
「── The two reinforcing battalions will arrive in around an hour! You can use all the munitions you have on hand!」
Ikuta's voice echoed in the Imperial headquarters. The order to fight the war that had entered its final phase to the end was conveyed to the entire battlefield through the Sprites.
「Notify me if you are lacking resources or manpower! We have made the preparations and will do our best to answer your requests! Don't forget, you never walk alone!」
Ikuta commanded with a firm attitude, and thought in a corner of his mind. History depicts the famous generals or strategists as if they were all knowing── but in the end, the duty of the commander-in-chief was to work behind the scenes. Preparing equipment for the troops, feed them, set up beds, and let them perform in their best condition. Formulating strategies and directing tactics were just an extension of that. The ones fighting were on the frontlines.

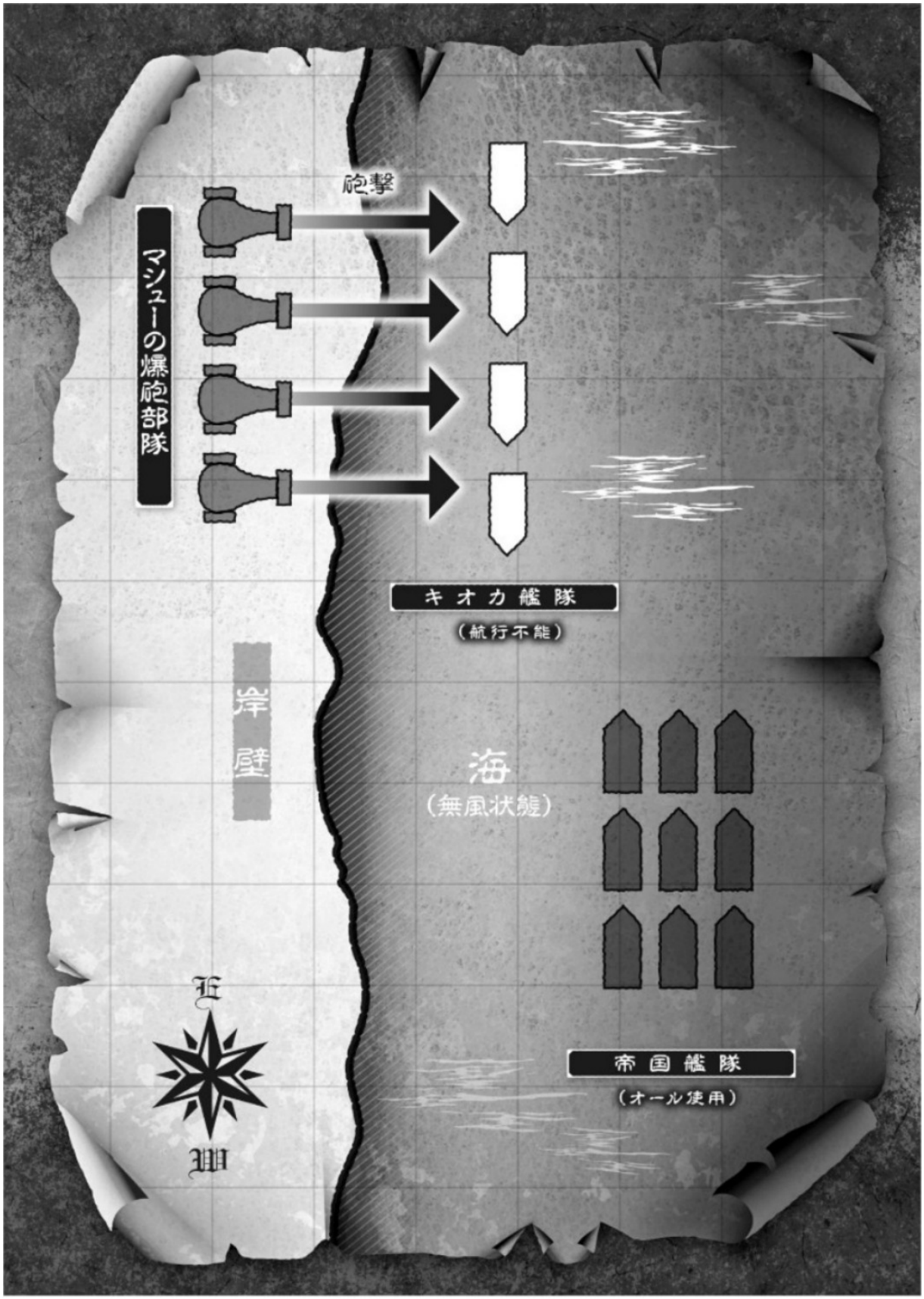
「As long as you don’t deviate from your mission, the command of the defences will be up to your judgement! No need to seek permission for any counter attack, just report the results after you have executed it!── Listen, don’t be afraid of failure! Your battlefield is not the only one! We will make up for minor mistakes!」
Ikuta wasn’t anxious or fearful. Because he would never walk alone.
「── Avoid making decisions by yourself! Launch the attack as one on my signal! If you follow my command, we will never lose!」
Jean kept commanding, fueled by his absolute confidence. It came so naturally that he didn’t give it a second thought. The army that executed the finely detailed plans without much delays── That was how wars were won. The Sprite communication reduced any mistakes during the relay of orders. And now, Jean Arkinex could exercise his will on every corner of the battlefield.
「Start bombardment in twenty minutes, and send in the infantry 50 minutes later! Their defences are estimated to fall in 270 minutes! Don’t waste time, the enemy is moving in the meantime too!」
Right now, his commands would not fail in being relayed, or get delayed. Jean’s decision was reflected on the battlefield, and the results would be feedback to him. His brain was churning at a speed unlike anything he experienced before, which even frightens himself. Was that how it felt to be the brain of an entire army?
「Major General! A report from the Navy!」
He received more information. This was the biggest and last factor to endure Kioka’s victory.
「──Field Marshal Sir!」
When Major Megu shouted with urgency, Ikuta realized the content.
「The observation post along the southern shores can see the retreating Imperial Navy being pursued by the Kioka Navy! They will be landing soon…!」
「── You had a good run. But this is it, Pirate Navy.」
The Fleet Commander of the Kioka fleet stood at the front deck of the flagship said with glee. The Imperial Fleet they were pursuing had been on the run after losing a naval battle. And now, they had closed the distance with them near the coast.
「If you go with the wind, you’ll run into the rocks. If you want to avoid that, you’ll have to steer into the wind. But you’ll be doomed if you do that. I will let you have a taste of your ships being blasted into smithereens.」
Determined to conclude this long game of tag with maximum firepower, the Fleet Commander smiled viciously.
「We can finally send reinforcements to the land unit. We arrived later than scheduled, but marking our victory over the Empire with our landing isn’t bad either──」
「── It’s over for real this time. The battle had already been decided, but they dragged this on futilely for so long.」

Greg said annoyedly on the 『White Wings』 which was a short distance in front of the flagship. In contrast with him, Elulufay was looking at the sky with a tense face.
『... Something's wrong.』
『Huh?』
『Misai looks perturbed. I have never seen it react like this.』
The Great Mother said as she looked at her pet bird circling above them. She turned and borrowed her subordinate's Sprite, then said after her call got through:
『— This is Captain of the 『White Wings』, Elulufay Tenerexilla. Please tell the Fleet Admiral that the wind is strange, and to be careful.』
A dubious silence came from the other end of the Sprite, before the signalman spoke with the Fleet Admiral. A while later, she received an answer:
『This is the reply from the Fleet Admiral. I don't have time to listen to bird caw— end message.』
The call got cut off with a sarcastic tone. Elulufay stood before the Sprite with a sigh, and then looked up to the sky with a serious face.
『.....』
At the same time. At the head of the Imperial fleet they were chasing, Naval Lieutenant Polminue was standing at the bow of her ship. She wasn't looking at the enemy, and was waiting for something with her eyes closed.
『Hey, the rocky shore is right before us...!』
『Isn't it time yet, Pommy ...!?』
Naval Lieutenant Paume and Naval Lieutenant Yorin who were directing the crew looked urgently at her. The shore was before them, and the enemy fleet behind. Everyone knew they were caught between a rock and a hard place.
『.....』
And of course, Pommy wasn't just closing her eyes. She was focusing on her senses aside from her eyes, and listening to the wind with a focus others couldn't mimic. Time passed in this suffocating silence— then suddenly, she opened her eyes wide.
『—Now!』
On her command, the helmsman turned the steering wheel. The crew turned the angles of the sail, and the ships behind followed their lead.
『The enemy leading ship has turned against the wind!』
The Kioka sailor shouted after seeing the enemy's movement. The Fleet Admiral bared his teeth in anticipation.
『They are finally showing signs of weakness! Good— we will steer into the wind too! Then fire when the flanks of our ships are facing them!』
After receiving his orders, the crew started adjusting the sails. That will turn them parallel to the Imperial fleet sailing out to the sea, exposing them to cannon fire. After playing hide and seek for so long, sinking the entire

enemy fleet wasn’t a bad result— the Fleet Admiral was deluding before he suddenly stopped. He already gave the order, but the ship wasn’t turning.
「...? Hey, what happened!? I gave the order to steer into the wind!」
「N-No— we already turned the wheel and set the sails...」
The troubled adjutant looked around him with a troubled face. The crew were moving without any mistakes, and for a while, he couldn’t find the reason why the ship didn’t change course.
「— Ahh—」
But he soon realized the reason. It wasn’t just his flagship, the rest of the fleet also didn’t change course. They were inside stagnant air.
「I-It’s the wind! The wind stopped! Fleet Admiral, we can’t move like this...!」
「What did you say?」
The Fleet Admiral stared with his eyes wide open. Instead of turning, the ship was just slowing down. He looked towards the enemy frantically.
「The enemy already changed course… Impossible! Did they already know about this windless situation...?」
By steering early, the Imperial fleet changed course right before the wind stopped. Both sides were coasting with their momentum, but without the wind, they would come to a stop soon too. The Fleet Admiral checked the situation and yelled at his confused subordinate:
「C-Calm down! This is unexpected, but not a big deal! The enemy can’t move either! We just need to continue our pursuit when the wind starts—」
Before he could even finish, his plan was overturned. A tremor hit suddenly— on the wobbling deck, the Fleet Admiral couldn’t brace himself for the impact and fell on his butt. Water pillars shot up in the sea around them, drenching him with salty seawater.
「W-What is it this time!」
「— First shot is on target. Adjust, top 2, right 3.」
On the coast some distance away from the chaotic Kioka fleet. A pudgy youth was standing in the middle of neat rows of cannons as he said out loud:
「Inform the flagship 「Red Dragon」— This is Army Major Matthew Tetzirich. The Imperial First Artillery Regiment, we will aid your fleet with support fire— continue the bombardment!」
On his order, the artillery men started firing their Blast Cannons— the accuracy had already been calibrated. With a boom, the shells that had locked on to their targets flew towards the enemy fleet.

□Huh── bombardment from the shore?□
The commander grabbed on to a railing to endure the shells that hit the side of his ship and yelled. They were too engrossed in the pursuit and didn't notice. Being close to land meant they were in range of attacks from the coast.
□E-Evasive maneuvers! Move the ships! Do something□!□
□That's impossible, Fleet Admiral! Our sailship can't move without wind...!□
Understanding the iron rule that applies to all sailship without exceptions, the Fleet Admiral's face scowled. How did this happen? Victory was in their grasp, and suddenly, they were caught in a crucible?
□Damn it, damn it! Did they predict that we will be trapped here, and deployed their Blast Cannons here? The Imperial army don't have that many Blast Cannons, it's impossible for them to make such a gamble...!□
The man screamed in rejection of reality. However, their troubles were just beginning. When he noticed the abnormal situation, his subordinate beside him said with a trembling voice:
□F-Fleet Admiral… The enemy fleet...□
□What the hell is it this time?□
The Fleet Admiral stared with bloodshot eyes at the direction his subordinate was pointing at. And then, he saw it── a scene unimaginable in modern naval warfare.
□The enemy fleet is moving. They are using oars...!□
□── The hand on a clock going forward all the time is so boring. We should turn back the clock from time to time.□
On the deck of the Imperial flagship □Red Dragon□. Erynphin Jurgus could feel the ship being propelled by the oars extending from the sides of the ship, and smiled boldly.
□You must have forgotten. Before sailship became commonplace, this was how ships were moved. With men painstakingly rowing their oars… We still remember, because we have been pirates since that era.□
A galley was a vessel propelled by rowing. Since human effort was the main propulsion, they needed a large number of rowers, making it an inefficient outdated watercraft for the modern navy. Compared to the latest Blast Cannon ships in the Kioka fleet, this was a foolhardy move that went against the times.
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galley
>
□Just comparing the effort to move the ships, galley is far inferior to sail ships… However, this ship has one clear advantage. It can move without needing any wind.□
The advantages that had been proven with the times had been reversed because there wasn't any wind. Admiral Jurgus drew his scimitar and raised it up high, just like what his ancestors did in the past.
□Alright then── Let's fight an old fashion war!□
□... Splendid, Matthew, Pommy. Absolutely splendid...!□

Ikuta who received the news said to himself with a trembling voice. This was the biggest plan to overturn the disadvantages of this war.
After the fleet lost in a naval battle and got pursued by the enemy, Matthew's artillery unit would stand by along the coast, waiting for the time to provide support. He would maintain frequent contact with Pommy on the leading vessel of the fleet. They confirmed each other's position, and decided the place to lure the enemy fleet into— the goal was to launch a bombardment when they were troubled by the wind dying down, and achieved the best result. The plan worked beautifully, and they succeeded in the counter attack against the Kioka fleet.
"Ikuta Solork sending a message to all units— The Imperial Navy has repelled the Kioka Navy. I repeat, the Imperial Army has repelled the Kioka Navy."
Ikuta informed the entire army without any hesitation. The naval fleet was still in the middle of an engagement, but there were no problems with announcing the results early. No matter how the second naval battle turned out, the Kioka fleet has suffered irreversible losses. Kioka's goal of using the sea route to transport large units of troops was impossible now. Which meant—
"The enemy won't receive reinforcements from the sea— it's our turn to counterattack."


砲撃
マシューの爆砲部隊
キオカ艦隊
（航行不能）
岸壁
海
（無風状態）
帝国艦隊
（オール使用）
E
W

□—Jean!□
Miara's tense voice rang out. The Kioka headquarters were stunned by this devastating news, and the white-haired officer stood silently before the map.
□... I'm not that surprised… Because I already expected this in my heart? When the □Great Mother of White Wings□ wasn't selected as the Fleet Admiral, I have doubts about victory in the sea...□
He said in a cold tone. For a moment, his back looked like a withered tree, and Miara felt the urge to touch his shoulder. However— Jean had an air of rejection about him, and he continued with a low voice:
□... I'm fine, Miara. We can't expect support from the sea, that's all. That's all...□
The war had reverted back to fifty fifty. However— without reinforcements from the ocean, Jean's burden would increase drastically. He had to use the forces he had on hand to complete the mission that should have been done by the reinforcements.
He completely disassembled the finely crafted strategy he formulated, then reorganized the scattered elements in his mind. The reworking that would normally take a few hours of war conference was compiled in his head in a far shorter time. Drip— blood flowed out of his nose. However, the incredibly focused Jean didn't notice.
□... I just need to work on it. There won't be any problems if I make up for their absence...!□
□—Fire the salvo!□
A few hours after the Imperial navy turned the tides in the sea. In the central north of the Empire, along the hilly mountains where the Kioka forces were advancing, Sariha successfully took the enemy by surprise.
□Hey, we really flanked behind the enemy! It worked, even though we are just beating a dead horse!□
□It's not beating a dead horse! I already said we found a gap after probing the enemy's surveillance net!□
Suya fired her crossbow beside her as she retorted. Her eyes for tactics were nurtured by Ikuta, and she precisely saw through a fatal lapse in the enemy's movements.
□Unlike the enemy we have faced so far, this unit showed us an opening! A chance for us to gain the upper hand!□
□You don't need to tell me that! We got them by the neck, so I won't let go so easily...!□
Sariha reloaded his Wind Gun as he shouted. Turning the tables from just defending made the troops forget about their fatigue and raised their morale.
On the other hand, some units got caught in a bind. The guerilla cavalry unit led by Honorary Field Marshal Igsem that had performed admirably since the war began was now in trouble.
□Haha… it doesn't look good, Captain...□

「This is a very dangerous situation.」
In contrast with what he said, the vermillion haired general spoke with his usual calm tone. It was obvious that their situation was dire. First— They should be moving in a battalion, but they numbered 20, less than a platoon. Worst of all, they didn't have their horses, and only had their melee weapons while trapped in the middle of the battlefield.
「We can hide because of the fog, but once it's gone, we won't have any cover… We need to act before the wind starts again.」
As the Honorary Field Marshal Igsem said, there was a thick fog hanging around them. The enemy couldn't see them because of the fog, but that fog was one of the reasons for the predicament of the cavalry. They got separated from their comrades after encountering the enemy and fighting a chaotic battle.
「I'm not confident… But from what I saw on my mount, we outnumber the enemy in that direction. If we have to make a bet, let's try to breakthrough that way.」
First Lieutenant Niam Nei shared the intel she saw with her sharp eyes. The vermillion haired general made his decision immediately.
「Not a bad suggestion. However, we need to minimize the gambling factor.」
Honorary Field Marshal Igsem said as he stood up. First Lieutenant Nei looked at him walking away and stopped him in a panic:
「W-Wait? Where are you going, Captain?」
「I'm going to create a diversion alone. First Lieutenant Nei, lead the unit out of the encirclement in the meantime.」
「— No, I don't get what you are saying. What do you mean by creating a diversion by yourself, that's not how you fight a war?」
When his subordinate waved a hand to dismiss that, the vermillion haired general stopped explaining and prepared to leave. But Niam grabbed his uniform from behind.
「No… No no no, wait, Captain. I know your swordsmanship is strong, but this is too much. We should follow my proposal and attack one point with all our forces, right?」
「No. As the Captain, I have to take responsibility for the unit's dire situation.」
「This kind of responsibility isn't shouldered by asking the Captain to kill a large horde of enemies. What will you do if the fog disperse while you are going on a rampage? You'll be shot full of holes.」
「Do not worry. Even if I die, I will complete my diversion mission.」
The vermillion haired general said calmly. His even tone infuriated Niam.
「... Ah」 we talked about all that, but Captain, you think it's fine even if you died, right?」
「.....」
「It feels super horrible… I heard your daughter passed away. Did you catch a disease of wanting to die without even knowing it?」

Niam grumbled, forgetting the difference between their ranks. She then took out a rope and tied her waist to the vermillion haired general's waist, linking them together for some reason. Igsem couldn't help asking in bafflement:
"... What is the meaning of this, First Lieutenant Nei?"
"Like I said, let's follow the original plan. We will break through that point. Since you are strong in swordsmanship, then you can stay by our side and protect us."
"... The Igsem dual swords are suitable to fight alone against a group, but not adequate for protecting multiple allies. I decided on the diversion because of that. I'm cutting the ropes."
The vermillion haired general was about to sever the rope with his short sword, but was blocked by Niam's hand. As if to challenge him to cut if he dared.
".. First Lieutenant Nei."
"Shut up retard— I get pissed off when I see people who throw their lives away lightly, and will feel angrier when I'm protected by such a person."
Niam spat out all that without a hint of courtesy, then snorted.
"Let me tell you something boring— I lost a child too."
"—"
"... I didn't give birth smoothly, and we were both in danger of dying. Somehow, I was the only one that lived… Sigh, I didn't want to have a child, but it can't be helped since I got pregnant, so I just have to love him as much as possible— That was what I was thinking before the botched childbirth.
This isn't a tragedy unique to your family. There are many children who died before their parents— and what happens after that? Feel guilty that their child died because of them, and they aren't qualified to be parents, so they should follow after their child? No— are you kidding me, that's not it!"
Niam grabbed the vermillion haired general's collar with the corner of her eyes raised. Their comrades were slacked jawed. In the long history of the Empire, very few people ever did that to an Igsem.
Niam pulled his collar down and leaned into his ear, saying quietly so others wouldn't overhear. But her sharp voice drilled right into his eardrums:
"Live on seriously! Struggled desperately and cry for others to spare your life, and then die! That's how humans are! Even if you want to live a clean life, you can't, even if you want to die, you will live on! We are creatures that survive stubbornly even if our bodies are submerged in a swamp! That's how I live my life! And how I will continue to live!"
"—"
"If you want to live with a thick face, you have to start by grabbing on to your life tightly! Just use me as your model, Captain!
If you mimic me well, I will show you something nice, and take good care of your rod—!"

Niam said her piece and let him go. She focused her feelings on getting out of this predicament. But the worst thing happened the next moment.
「— Tch, oh no! The wind—!」
She realized too late. The wind dispersed the fog obscuring their view. *We have to run while the fog is still here*
— Niam decided and looked to her comrades—
「— Get down.」
「Huh?」
The vermillion haired general grabbed her head and pushed her down onto the ground. At this moment, gunshots echoed around them. The Kioka soldiers outside the fog were all hit, and collapsed one after another.
「— Lost your touch after being away from the frontlines for so long? You got careless, Sol.」
The Imperial soldiers kept firing as they advanced. After they surrounded Niam and the others, a familiar jade-eyed General appeared before them with a Wind Gun on his shoulder. The Vermillion haired general stood up immediately and saluted.
「I can't refute that. Thank you for the save, General Remeon.」
「It's nothing. If it's just that many enemies, you can break through the encirclement alone.」
General Remeon said as he watched his men sweep up the remnants of the enemy. He then looked at Niam who was sitting by the vermillion haired general's feet.
「... So, why is there a rope between you and that officer?」
「She tied me up and lectured me. She told me to cherish my life and live on seriously.」
Honorary Field Marshal Igsem answered with a straight face. General Remeon stifled a laugh and raised the corners of his lips.
「... When did you develop a sense of humour, Sol? That's not a bad thing, but don't make me laugh under such a situation, you'll distract me.
But you have lost a lot of horses. It isn't safe here, hurry on to the base in the rear. Rest well before you get your replacement mounts, your guerilla unit deserve a break.」
The jade-eyed General praised their efforts, and ordered his men to retreat. As they walked towards their base, the vermillion haired general quietly asked his subordinate who was trying to undo the tight knot on her waist:
「First Lieutenant Nei, one more thing.」
「Y-Yes?」
「When you were lecturing me earlier, you mentioned that you will take care of my rod. I understand that, what do you mean by rod?」
He asked seriously without any hint of jesting. Standing diagonally in front of the dumbstruck Niam, General Remeon couldn't help bursting out in laughter:
「... I told you not to make me laugh, Sol...!」

On the sea to the south. The artillery unit led by Matthew provided support── and used the moment where the wind stopped to bombard from the coast, turning the tide of the battle in one go. The Imperial Navy, who turned all their ships into galleys, launched an attack on the trapped Kioka fleet.

「── Yes, it’s going great! As expected, this is how a naval battle should be!」

Admiral Jurgus shouted happily at the front deck of the flagship. Ramming the flank of the enemy ship with their bow, and performing naval boarding actions to fight in a melee battle── with the Blast Cannons turning mainstream, such battles had gradually faded away. But just this once, it brought momentum to the Imperial forces. For the Kioka Fleet composed entirely of Blast Cannons, they wanted to avoid such a battle the most.

「Admiral, please stay back…! Back behind this shield!」

「You’re worrying too much. If the Admiral hides in a place like this, the crew will lose their morale. Be more relaxed, people are seldom hit by stray bullets!」

Admiral Jurgus walked fearlessly on the deck. They had suppressed most of the enemy, but there was no telling if new enemies would board their ship. The adjutant followed quickly behind him.

「Admiral, please wait── Uwah!」

He slipped on the blood of the enemy sailors, but before his back hit the deck and the adjutant braced himself for the fall, someone grabbed his arm.

「Oh… are you alright?」

「Huh── Ah, yes! Thank you!」

The adjutant thanked him and stood straight up, and saw a man wearing a Naval Lieutenant uniform just like him. His face was unfamiliar, but it wasn’t surprising for there to be someone he didn’t know on the flagship. He was about to ask that man for his name when that man turned with a smile.

「Be careful next time, that’s how Admiral Jurgus is. If you worry about every bold action he takes, then you won’t have the time to do anything else.」

The man walked forth with that advice. Seeing that man walking towards Admiral Jurgus, the adjutant felt relieved and followed after him.

「── Pardon me for interrupting in the middle of a battle, but can I make a report, Admiral Jurgus?」

He said to the commander with a calm voice. Admiral Jurgus immediately answered:

「Yes, go ahead── 「Danmier」.」

Admiral Jurgus called out his name as he turned around. Immediately after that── with a slick sensation, the man before him felt a pain in his abdomen.

「── Huh?」

The man said in a daze as he stared at the scimitar blade in his stomach──── the next moment, he knelt onto the deck with his hands on his abdomen. He raised his sweat stained face, looking at the man who stabbed him with a greeting── compared to the stab, he was more shocked that he was seen through.

「..... W-Why...」

「It’s not some amazing judgement. I just predicted that you will probably pick this time to reap my head.」

Admiral Jurgus rested his scimitar on his shoulder and said calmly. Those words made the Phantom who used to call himself Danmier Kanron dumbstruck. Was everything within his expectations? Be it the assassination attempt, or that the timing would be in the middle of the final battle.

「Another thing.「Pardon me for interrupting in the middle of a battle, but can I make a report?」── You sound too calm. We just changed all the adjutants into young people, and no one dared talk to me with such a bold tone during a battle… You changed your face and voice, but leaving your fearless attitude intact is your mistake. Since the most prominent part of your character remained unchanged, I won’t fall for it.」

The head of the Navy said confidently. He looked down at the deck stained by the other party’s blood.

「It’s a mortal wound, but you still have a chance to choose how you will die. Do what you will. Since you are a Phantom, you must have the resolve to go through with this to the end.」

The right to choose his own end. After receiving this gift at the very end, the Phantom smiled wryly from nostalgia.

「You are still the same. Both your stern and gentle side… Much obliged.」

Phantom pulled out a dagger from his sleeve after saying that, and charged at his assassination target with his dying body. Admiral Jurgus raised the scimitar in his right hand, ready to engage── when his 「current」 adjutant charged over before his eyes.

「――――?」

「Warrrgghhh!」

The adjutant tackled the Phantom, then straddled and strangled him. Admiral Jurgus and the Phantom both looked surprised.

「Hey… You.」

「Ahhh! D-Don’t touch the Admiral! Stay away!」

The man couldn’t hear the voice of his superior as he strangled the Phantom with a yell. After tens of seconds, the head of the Imperial Navy sighed.

「... Spare him already, he’s already dead.」

「... Huh?」

When that was pointed out, the adjutant looked stiffly at the Phantom── the Phantom was dead with his eyes wide open in surprise. He didn’t die from asphyxia, but from blood loss from his abdomen wound during his struggle with the adjutant. The unexpected outcome made Admiral Jurgus alternate his gaze between the dazed current adjutant and the dead former adjutant.

「You are a different type from that guy, but you are surprisingly brave── I have changed my evaluation of you. Here, a reward.」

He took out something from his pocket and tossed it to his adjutant. The adjutant hurriedly caught it with both hands, and opened his eyes wide at the thing in his hand.

□P-Pearl…?□

□This is impartiality in dispensing rewards and punishment. I will kill you if you dare betray me.□

Admiral Jurgus used the loot he got during his competition with his niece to harvest oysters as a reward. He looked down at his former adjutant again. Feeling he shouldn't interfere, the adjutant quickly stood up and backed away. The leader of the Imperial Navy said to the corpse of the Phantom lying on the deck:

□You probably can't hear me, but in the end, I think you picked the wrong man to betray… Instead of making a living by backstabbing others, working on my ship is much more pleasant right, Danmier?□

Admiral Jurgus kicked his shoulder with the tip of his feet— The face looking up at the sky seemed to be smiling wryly.

□— He is finally showing cracks.□

Ikuta muttered after ending a call, then took in a deep breath to send oxygen to his brain— in this war, he made sure not to exhaust his troops under his command, as well as himself.

□— One of Professor Anarai's theory is □attention economy□. Simply put, focus and attention are limited resources. Just like stamina, it will be depleted when used, and won't replenish without rest.□

<TL:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention_economy
>

This was only natural for Ikuta. However, that wasn't true for Jean. For the □Insomniac Brilliant General□ who abused his body, this was a foreign way of thinking.

□This applies to you too, Jean. Fatigue will build up without you seeing it, and your mind will slowly get tired— And of course, you have exceptional mental endurance, and with your insomniac nature, you might unconsciously assume that your focus is inexhaustible.

And that is true for the battles so far, since the amount of information never exceeded your load… However, things are different this time. This should be your first time commanding such a large army— and with the advent of Sprite communication, the amount of information given to the commander

will increase by several levels.

Unlike physical fatigue, mental exhaustion couldn’t be sensed easily. Because the mind would be the one judging the amount of fatigue too. Without a fixed external standard to measure against, humans couldn’t help pushing themselves. The more serious the person’s attitude towards work, the more their inclination to do so.

When you first see the Sprite communication, you must be thinking— if I use this technology, I can reflect my will on all the battles. I won’t have to be troubled by inept frontline commanders… And you actually did so. By prohibiting the frontline commanders from thinking for themselves, you demand them to execute your orders faithfully, and create the perfect army never seen before in history.

At a glance, this might seem like a wonderful scene, but it was actually putting all the burden of commanding on one person. Shouldering that burden in that position because everyone thought he could do it, was the tragedy Jean was facing.

And I’m aiming for that arrogance— in the battles so far, I’m working tirelessly on exhausting your attention economy. By sending soldiers to move in incomprehensible ways, you have to think about what is the intention behind that move? Even if the action is meaningless, forcing you to think is meaningful.

It was said that humans could only sprint at full speed for less than ten seconds. Since one’s attention economy was limited, there would be a similar limit for mental exhaustion. Even if they never felt it before, all humans had such a limit. By commanding the entire army against Ikuta Solork, the white-haired officer was venturing into unknown territories and reaching his limits for the first time.

With the defeat of the Kioka navy, the burden they should be shouldering will all fall onto you— it’s time for you to fall, Jean Arkinex.

You got it wrong right off the bat. This isn’t a showdown between you and me. It doesn’t matter whether there is Sprite communication or not, you are supposed to fight a war alongside your comrades!

Ugh— Guaaahh!

Jean screamed. As his subordinates watched in horror, the youth smashed his head against a pillar.

「Why!? Why isn’t my mind working at a time like this! Move── Please, move! Now! If you don’t work now,then my life won’t have any meaning…!」

Only frustration spun in his body── there were heaps of problems he needed to solve, but he couldn’t focus on them. His mind was as heavy as a rusty gear lacking oil, something that had never happened before. His brain that had been fine no matter how long he worked without sleep was now──!

「──Ahh──」

At that moment, Jean saw it. A short distance away in the headquarters── His family was standing there. His parents and sister. They didn’t have any emotions on their faces, but they were clearly conveying their thoughts. *Continue burning up your life── You are not permitted to collapse.*

「… It’s fine… It’s fine, mother, father, sister…! I can do it, I won’t fall in a place like this…! I will achieve victory, I will definitely achieve victory. So──!」

Blood oozed out of his eyes and nose, and Jean turned his twitching face back to the Sprites. The huge amount of information made him dizzy── But he wouldn’t give in. When he was desperately driving his frail heart to take that all in...

「──Huh?」

Someone was holding him tightly from behind.

「… Miara…?」

The dazed Jean called his adjutant’s name. Miara tightened her embrace.

「… Your family isn’t there.」

She said with a trembling voice. That was a nightmare he could see even when he was awake. She faced the nightmare she had been ignoring head on, and refuted their existence.

「They aren’t there. The family blaming you is an illusion created from your sense of guilt── They wanted you to live, so they will never wish for your demise in such a way…!」

Miara cried with conviction. Tears rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the youth’s back. Jean’s dazed mind thought how warm that felt.

「Please── rest. You have worked long enough. Be it the citizens or Sir Kyakushii, I won't let anyone pick a bone with you. So, Jean, go to sleep. Have a quiet rest with gentle dreams… And then head towards 『tomorrow』. Head towards the tomorrow that you lost since the day you lost everything...!」

As he listened, a sense of weightlessness surrounded Jean. The figures of his family in the corners of his eyes were disappearing.

When he realized it, Jean was standing in an endless white space.

His sister was standing beside him with a serene smile. Surprisingly, he didn't feel any grudge from her at all. He shifted his gaze puzzledly, and saw his parents standing beside him with gentle smiles.

「Sister── And Father, Mother… Why… I don't──」

I don't have the right to see your warm and gentle faces,
the youth thought. He hadn't repaid anything yet. But contrary to his confusion, his sister gently embraced him. A nostalgia that almost drove him to tears filled his chest.

── You did well. You really worked hard, Jean.

It was his sister's voice. She wasn't silently blaming him, and her tone was filled with care and concern. Ever since he forgot about sleep, he could finally hear his family's voice after so many years.

── Alright now, rest well, my precious little brother. I will sing you your favourite lullaby.

His sister said and started humming with her brother in her arms. The tone changed at a whim, and was a weird lullaby Jean remembered. Just like her carefree character, his sister would change the lyrics whenever she sang.

「── You have a good family.」

An unexpected voice rang out. Jean looked surprised, and a familiar dark-haired youth was standing some distance in front of him.

「... S-Solork...」

「I won't lose to you either. My mother's singing voice is wonderful.」

Ikuta said as if to compete and turned, then continued speaking.

“Sleep as much as you want. If you feel tired after waking up, then sleep some more. Until you wipe away all your exhaustion, you are forbidden from getting off your bed. I will take care of things in the meantime, and lessen your workload.”

Ikuta said as he started walking, leaving Jean behind. Jean wanted to stop him and grab his shoulders, but his legs wouldn’t move. Feeling the strength leave his body, Jean reached out desperately:

“... Wait... Wait, Solork. My duel with you isn’t—”

Over
, Jean insisted. Ikuta turned back half way with a nefarious smile:

“No thanks, this is my response to you for making me work so much. Good night, Jean— put a bed in your room in the future. Pick a wider one, so you won’t fall off when you turn in your sleep.”

After bidding farewell with those words— the tranquility of the lullaby liberated Jean’s consciousness from his misery.

At that moment, the youth’s body in Miara’s tight embrace turned heavy.

“...Jean...?”

She supported his body weight with both arms, and looked at his face timidly... She gasped— He was breathing soundly in his sleep. Jean’s eyes were closed gently in quiet rest.

“..... Phew...”

Miara felt a strong sense of relief. She thought in her heart—
He is finally willing to let it go. He can finally rest.

“C-Commander...”

His subordinate walked over with a face of unease. Their eyes were still dependent on the white-haired officer— Even so, she won’t let anyone rely on him anymore. Miara curtly crushed the remnants of their expectations in their hearts.

“It’s impossible to continue the plan... I’m taking temporary command from the Commander-in-Chief, as of this moment, we will abandon our invasion of

the Imperial territories.

Miara declared to everyone, and gave out short instructions. With the help of her men, she carried Jean to the break room next door. Jean was laid gently onto a bed, with boards set up around him— so his slumber wouldn't be disturbed no matter what.

All units, retreat— notify all officers on the field post haste.

... Hey, that's...

At the Empire's last line of defence, the Imperial forces led by Kubalha Shiba were holding the line. They watched the enemy from their trenches, and realized something was strange.

... Did you see that?... Yes. The enemy is withdrawing...?

The Kioka soldiers were pulling away with cautious steps, returning the way they came by columns, starting from the rear. The Imperial soldiers who had been enduring their fierce attack observed that in disbelief. Their commander opened a communication channel as he looked at the same scene.

... This is Kubalha Shiba. The enemy is withdrawing from my position, they might be mustering their forces to attack your side. Stay on your guard—

— No, the enemy is retreating on my end too.

In another location, the unit led by Sarihasrag responded to the call, as he observed the enemy from the trenches. As his heart wavered between determination and expectations, Suya beside him was holding her breath.

Their Artillery are retreating, and their rearguard is slowly backing away. We are getting the same reports from the alternative routes around us... Could this be...

...Lieutenant Colonel Torway, this is...

Along a southern route used by the Kioka army as an alternate path, Torway who was engaging the Kioka army with his snipers also saw the enemy falling back. The jade-eyed youth hiding on top of a branch said quietly:

... I can sense the enemy's fighting spirit fading away. This probably isn't a simple reroute of troops...

「── Ohh── So it’s over, huh?」

On the 「White Wings」 that had been boarded by the Imperial sailors and was in the midst of a melee battle. Elulufay accepted that unexpected fact rather easily.

「... I’m sorry, Greg. Pull the men back.」

「...Great Mother.」

Greg who was raising his halberd high to intimidate the enemy understood everything with just that. Elulufay looked at the Imperial soldiers wielding their scimitars, and spoke to one of them.

「You are the Captain, right? ──I just received instructions from headquarters to make a full retreat. It’s not my intent to continue the fight and create unnecessary sacrifices. I propose a ceasefire, what say you?」

When she heard that, Pommy stared with her eyes wide open. She was eager to join the fray, and felt troubled by this sudden turn of events. Unable to find the right response, Pommy asked her colleague fighting nearby.

「... What should we do, Yorin?」

「Don’t ask me」! No matter what, we need to report, inform and consult!」

<TL:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ho-Ren-So
>

「Oh, that’s right── Erm, I will notify my superior, so you need to get your Fleet Admiral’s consent too.」

「I want to do that, but our flagship has been captured by your comrades. I’m the highest ranking active officer right now, so you can treat this as the will of the entire fleet──」

「... They are working together to rescue the sailors. Looks like it’s over.」

Matthew was in command of the artillery unit spread out along the coast. He put down his telescope, having seen enough of the naval battle── after getting into melee battle, the Blast Cannons could not provide support. He watched from the sideline, confident of the Imperial Navy’s power, but they didn’t betray that trust.

「This is a close victory, Major… It will be all over if our deployment was slightly off.」

「Speaking of that, that's also true if the Navy didn't draw the enemy here… That was really, really close. I don't want to do that again.」

Matthew answered with a sigh as the gentle sea breeze caressed his cheeks. The windless situation that surprised the Kioka fleet was over. After they completed the ceasefire and rescued everyone who fell overboard, they could start sailing again.

The pudgy youth felt a load had been taken off his shoulders. His subordinate who was still watching with a telescope poked Matthew's shoulder.

「…Major, that seems to be a message for you.」

「Hmm?」

Matthew puzzledly took the telescope offered by his subordinate and looked, and realized after looking at the direction he pointed out.

「── Haha, that girl…」

Pommy stood at the head of the ship proudly, just like Captain Garciev, and blew a kiss towards the land. Matthew also raised his arm high in response to her unique victory gesture.

At the same time, far to the east from the frontlines, the Kioka Republic Capital Norandot. Ario, who received the message in the Parliament office, slumped back into his chair for the first time after assuming the position of Prime Minister.

「S-Sir──!」

He couldn't even hear his subordinate's concerned voice. His solid preparations for the final battle should be a perfect plan leading to their victory. The Kioka Republic's path towards prosperity── was crumbling and getting sealed into darkness.

「── He lost? My son lost?」

He tried saying it out loud, but still couldn't accept it. His hero should bring him victory. Even if he burns out his life, he would bring certain victory.

Because that’s what heroes do.

That was the delusion he had. In the end— this man believed more firmly in Jean Arkinex’s victory than anyone else. Just like the innocent toddler waiting for the triumphant return of the heroes of justice.

「... I see, understood.」

In a corner of the last line of defence, a short distance from the capital. General Remeon who was garrisoned here just heard the report from the other units.

「The Kioka forces are pulling back from all fronts… We have outlasted them.」

After ending the call, he relayed the situation to the vermillion haired general standing beside him. Solvenares, who had gone through a series of battles and was waiting to fight a melee battle, nodded quietly at that news.

「... We really die hard, Tel.」

General Remeon opened his eyes wide. Tel— how long has it been since he last heard his nickname used by Bada?

「— You’re right, Sol.」

And he responded naturally. Even after so long, that name came out very smoothly.

And so, news of the certain victory reached the palace in the Imperial Capital Banhataal.

「... Well done. You did really well, Solork...」

Chamille said to herself after ending the call in her office. The moment she had been waiting for was right before her, and the girl’s shoulders started to shiver.

「Kioka who had lost it’s all out invasion campaign is out of options. The war— this long war is finally over. After so many meaningless sacrifices, this is finally at its end...」

She said as she thought about the number of lives that had been lost. She wouldn’t be forgiven no matter how much she apologized. However— those

sacrifices had finally gotten a result.

「... However, this 「doesn't mean the Empire won」.」

Chamille muttered quietly. It was finally time to enact the plan she had been harbouring all this while.

「We will revert to our old ways if things remain the same. We will just get arrogant over this temporary victory, and continue to rely on the military as the final solver of our problems. That's meaningless. In order to stop history from repeating── we need to destroy the establishment itself.」

That was the greatest wish of Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik. As the Empress, she held overall command over the Imperial forces, and would betray the country in the clearest way at this moment. She would abandon the victory that they had earned, and tarnish the troops' valiant effort in the cruelest way possible.

She imagined the rage of the masses after carrying out this plan, and how she would be hanged, drawn and quartered── and suddenly smiled. That ending put her at ease.

「It's time to fulfill my goal── I will be issuing an edict personally. Shia, activate the Jade Voice Broadcast.」

She was ready. In order to end the Empire that was on its last legs, she spoke to the Sprite of the late vermillion-haired girl── but was answered with silence.

「...Shia?」

Chamille was baffled, and called out to her partner on the table. The Royal Sprite should have answered the request of the Empress and opened a channel to all the Sprites in the Empire, but it shook its head quietly, refusing to execute that request. Chamille felt puzzled. Did she miss out on some procedure? She was about to ask Shia for the reason when...

「──Listen with respect and awe.」

「?」

The Jade Voice Broadcast suddenly started before her. The one speaking wasn't her, but a voice she knew very well.

「On behalf of the 28th Generation Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik, Imperial Field Marshal Ikuta Solork hereby issue an edict to all citizens.」

The youth started speaking. Chamille couldn't accept this, and grabbed Shia as she called out to the owner of that voice.

「Solork...?」

「All units, ceasefire── as of this moment, the Empire has lost the war. I repeat, the Empire has lost the war. Do not pursue the retreating enemy forces. I repeat, do not pursue the retreating enemy forces──」

Knowing very clearly that all the troops and every citizen with a Sprite partner would hear this, Ikuta said clearly… Jade Voice Broadcast was a one way broadcast. Despite knowing that, he could feel the countless people gasping on the other end of the Sprites.

「After the Kioka forces have finished retreating, all units are to return to their respective bases… Thank you everyone for your valiant efforts in this war.」

Saying that after declaring they lost was the worst sophistry, thought the youth. He had trampled over his subordinates' efforts, and still managed to utter these words of gratitude.

「... F-Field Marshal Sir? That order is──」

The wide eyed Major Megu stood in a daze. He wasn't even mad, and only felt confusion. Seeing his adjutant's complete trust in him hurt Ikuta more than any words could ever do.

「... This isn't some surprise scheme. I'm sorry, Major Megu.」

Ikuta regretted saying that… He already decided not to apologize to anyone from that moment.

「I say again, I didn't go mad. I planned this from the beginning. After this war started── No, far before this war began, I have been fighting with this goal in mind.」

「── Ahh──」

When he said that, Major Megu finally accepted reality. He realized that something that shouldn't happen has happened, and needed time to make

sense of it. Before he could decide on what to do, Ikuta told him:

「I might not be qualified to say this, but hold off on calling the guards a little while later── there is another enemy I need to deal with.」

He turned and left after saying that. As his adjutant looked on, Ikuta touched the shortsword on his waist as he left headquarters.

「Alright then── Let's go, Yatori.」

「W-What's happening?」

Behind the frontlines, in the field hospital filled with the wounded. The troops who heard the Jade Voice Broadcast immediately sat up frantically.

「What the hell, he said we lost...!」

「The enemy retreated, right? Then we defended our country. Doesn't that mean we won!?」

「What is the Field Marshal thinking──」

Questioning voices rippled through the tent. Haro couldn't ignore the heavily wounded patients trying to join in and shouted:

「Please calm down, your injuries will be aggravated if you move too much! We have heavily wounded patients here!」

The soldiers fell silent at her admonishment. However, that didn't calm their emotions, and they asked Haro:

「Major──Major Becker do you know anything?」

「That's right, you're close to the Field Marshal! What is that order just now── Ughh...!」

As expected, the person shouting aggravated his wounds and screamed. Haro didn't falter and answered with a firm tone:

「Right now, I'm not sure about Ikuta-san's intentions! ...However, there is one thing I can do! That is to send you all home safely! That's the only thing on my mind right now!」

Haro told them without hesitation, and the troops backed away from her determination. She looked back at them and thought── no matter what the

youth’s intentions were, her job wouldn’t change. She just had to follow through with her mission to the end.

「Alright then, lie down quietly. No matter what happens, I won’t let your injury worsens!」

「── Calm down!」

A firm voice reverberated in the air. After the Kioka forces withdrew from the frontlines, the troops remained chaotic. To calm them down, General Shiba and the other officers were shouting loudly.

「Don’t panic! You should know how deep the Field Marshal’s plan is! There must be a deep reason behind that order he issued!」

He was saying that there was nothing to worry about. However, General Shiba didn’t have a good grasp of the situation either. Ikuta didn’t even tell a family friend he had known since his father’s era.

「── Don’t be hasty! With our losses, we can’t pursue them right now! Get reorganized and wait for your next orders!」

Sariha fired his Wind Gun into the air and yelled. And of course, he knew nothing about this situation. The only thing he sensed was an air similar to the mock battle in the past── that everything was moving according to Ikuta’s plan.

「First Lieutenant Mittokarifu, you are too emotional. The troops are getting scared, so take a deep breath.」

「..... Yes Sir.」

He said to Suya beside him… Unlike the other subordinates, she didn’t make a ruckus and was standing stiff with a deathly silence. Sariha thought it was great that she even answered. He felt as if he was standing beside a Blast Cannon on the verge of exploding.

「...I never heard about this. What is that jerk trying to do...!?」

「.....」

「M-Major Matthew──」

The artillery men’s gazes focused on the slightly plump youth. Without any answer in mind, Matthew turned to them after a short silence and said

quietly:

「... Let’s return to Central.」

「B-But the Jade Voice Broadcast just now――」

「I don’t know. He didn’t tell me anything… And that’s why, I can’t do anything before I punch him in the face and ask!」

Matthew answered as he stamped on the ground. He was confused and angry, but wasn’t so green that he would panic just because of that. Suppressing all his emotions in his chest―― Matthew imagined how he would vent it all out at the dark-haired youth, and arranged for his unit to withdraw.

「... What are you trying to do, Ik-kun...」

After expending all their ammunition, Torway was returning to base with his unit as he murmured. Unlike the other units, the snipers didn’t question Torway. They could tell by observing the tense face of their superior officer that Torway didn’t have the answer.

「... This is a weird situation. What are you planning, Field Marshal?」

On the deck of the Imperial Navy flagship 「Red Dragon」 sailing near the southern port, Admiral Jurgus furrowed his brow with his scimitar in hand. He bellowed 「...who is slacking off!」 to shut up the rowdy sailors who had stopped working.

「Anyway, we can only spare the effort to return to port… and watch from the sidelines.」

「―― The enemy is retreating after failing in their attack! It’s indisputable that we have defended our nation! There’s no need to panic!」

In the center of the last line of defence guarding the path towards the capital, General Remeon raised his voice to drown out the noisy soldiers. He then whispered to his friend besides him:

「Sol, did you hear anything about this? I don’t understand his intentions! Declaring that we lost after gaining the upper hand...!」

「.....」

The vermillion haired general shook his head silently. He didn’t know anything either— he clenched his fists, ashamed about that fact.

「Why...! Why, Shia! Why won’t you broadcast my words?」

She was definitely the one panicking the most in the entire Empire. Chamille held her partner Sprite Shia with both hands, and yelled at the top of her lungs:

「Please answer...! This is wrong, this is all wrong! I have to be the traitor! The one to tell the soldiers that we lost the war, and the subject of all their hate! Our positions have been switched...!」

— Anxiety and confusion showed no signs of subsiding, and the girl could no longer stay calm as tears welled up in her eyes... What happened? It shouldn’t be like this. She should be the only one who understood the entire situation...!

「What are you thinking, Solork!? You even hide this from me, just what are you—!」

He told Matthew in the past, be it good or bad, everyone has their own story.

He wanted to tell Matthew to remember to try and understand their reasoning. It might be difficult to do so in war, but in other situations, he should try to imagine their background and circumstances, and patiently find the best way to interact with them.

However, the youth realized— there were people he hoped didn’t have a story.

「……」

The dark-haired youth stayed alone, not answering the questions directed towards him.

In the wide, silent room, he sat on the leather bench with his eyes closed— After leaving headquarters, Ikuta headed to the reception room one floor down. That was a room for high ranking officers to receive special guests.

Knocking came from the door. When the youth opened his eyes, a voice outside the door said:

「F-Field Marshal Sir, the Chancellor has come to visit.」

「Let him enter alone.」

He instructed the sentry outside. The sentry was a bit troubled, but he still allowed the guest to enter the room. The door opened with a creak. The face of the man who appeared was creased with rage── it was Imperial Chancellor Trisnai Izanma.

「── How dare you, Ikuta Sankrei.」

That was the first thing he said as he walked in. Ikuta didn't fear him at all, and smiled with a shrug.

「What, it's not like you to be so angry. You have complaints about the current situation?」

The youth joked and pretended to be retarded. Trisnai didn't respond with sarcasm and said directly:

「... Having you hanged, drawn and quartered isn't enough for your crimes, but let me get this clear first── why are you able to use the Jade Voice Broadcast!? That should be only possible for Her Majesty and me, her representative.」

Ikuta plainly answered that procedural-like question.

「I added an emergency protocol that is only applicable during emergencies… Currently, there are a limited number of Sprites capable of communication. Even if it is a one-sided broadcast, it will be more convenient for the Field Marshal to issue instructions to all citizens via Jade Voice Broadcast during times of war, right? Be it the deployment of units or the evacuation of the citizens, I just need to give the order once. Compared to you who claim the right as a representative during an emergency, my logic is more adequate.」

「... You convinced Her Majesty's Sprite with that logic?」

「It took me a whole year to convince the Sprite. To be honest, it was really tiring. Sigh── since you can do it, I'm sure I can do it too.」

The youth laughed softly. Trisnai felt something was off from the youth's attitude, and cautiously cut into the core of the matter.

「My second question── the Empire clearly won the war. After the war reached this stage under your command, why did you lie about losing the war?」

Ikuta pushed his upper body up at that, and snorted with an arrogant taunt:

「Let me ask you instead── when did you start misunderstanding that I want the Empire to win?」

The youth said with a smile. His words that dismissed all presumptions made Trisnai furrowed his brows.

「My father was killed, my mother died, and the other half of my soul was murdered ──I detest this country from the bottom of my heart. I have no reason to make this nation prosper, and very much prefer seeing it razed to the ground. It's only natural for this to happen if I get appointed as the Field Marshal.」

Ikuta said plainly. Trisnai continued pressing with a solemn face:

「... In short, you are committing treason over a personal grudge?」

「Even if that's true, the one who is responsible for all this has no right to say anything.」

The youth retorted. He used his position as Field Marshal to enact his revenge, and didn't show the least bit of guilt for now. Trisnai felt light headed from too much rage. He couldn't stand the nature of that youth, but he did respect the youth's sense of responsibility as a soldier.

「Enough. There seems to be some things I'm not aware of── but I'm not interested anymore. You just need to die for your crimes!」

Trisnai roared with the corners of his eyes raised. His voice reached outside, and there seemed to be a lot of people moving outside. The fox has summoned his underlings to make the fool wallow in his own blood. However, the gunshots from behind the door made the fox shudder.

「.....!」

「It's impossible for the agents you raised to barge in here. My guards aren't that relaxed, I'm just intentionally letting your agents move about freely.」

Ikuta remained seated on his bench and said casually. Trisnai stared at him suspiciously.

「... If you have seen through this much, then you have no reason to let me in, right?」

「It’s the opposite, I intentionally showed an opening to lure you in. If my defences are ironclad, you will run again, right? I don’t want to play your favourite hide and seek again. So even if I have to use myself as bait, I want to fish you out.」

The youth continued, the killing intent in his eyes was saying—
you are the one who got baited.
Trisnai snorted and scoffed at his foolishness.

「Unfathomable. What do you plan to do after getting me here? ―You should know that you can’t kill me. If you kill me, the Imperial Chancellor cum Archbishop, all the Sprites in this country will cease functioning―」

「You’re no longer an Archbishop. Since two hours ago.」

The youth cut him off. Trisnai twitched his eye.

「... Absolute madman. It seems you don’t know that the status of an Archbishop is rock solid. Even a Pope can’t strip away that title.」

「You don’t have to tell me that, I have also learned the social system of Ra Saia Alderamin. Don’t be so hasty to judge, I didn’t say you have been stripped of the title.」

He said in a riddling tone. A few seconds later, the man realized as if he was struck by lightning.

「― Could it be?」

「That’s right― Two hours ago Pope Labutesuma and all the Archbishops except from you declared the dissolution of the Church of Aldera.」

Ikuta told him with a firm tone. Trisnai wavered emotionlessly in a way that he had never shown before.

「You didn’t know? It is as you say, a Pope can’t strip an Archbishop of his status, however― if more than half the Archbishops consents, she can dissolve the organization. There won’t be any titles to strip at this point, since the organization that conferred you that status no longer exist.」

The youth explained with a dry smile. The fox still couldn’t accept this fact and shook his head.

「... Impossible. I already coordinated my interest with the Pope. To continue maintaining Ra Saia Alderamin, dissolving the church right now is──」

「Your mistake is your focus on this point. Personal gains and nation benefit── if you are trying to bind her with these two points, then you have completely misjudged Jenancy Labutesuma.」

Ikuta refuted him with a sigh. With the decision of the old lady in the far north in his mind, he showed a face of worry.

「After becoming the Pope── No, after she became a priest, she had been thinking about the future of humanity. She bears the truth by herself, and shoulders the burden alone… But after that 「Trial of God」 ended, she finally found the path she should take.」

「The path she should take...?」

「Ra Saia Alderamin's obligation to be a religious nation is reaching its end. That is her conclusion.」

Ikuta firmly stated the ending guided by him and Professor Anarai's group.

「The truth about the Sprite will be shown to the world one day. When that time comes, the Church of Aldera won't be able to function as it did in the past… She doesn't want to be caught between two great nations and run the country like it has always been. And so── your offer is off the mark from the start.」

As long as the Pope's term continues, he wouldn't lose his position as Archbishop── Trisnai Izanma made a serious miscalculation with that assumption. The country Ra Saia Alderamin was formed for a goal aside from maintaining order as a nation. In contrast with many nations with the goal of unlimited prosperity and expansion, this nation only treats them as a means to an end. Protecting the future of humanity with Sprites was the raison d'etre of Ra Saia Alderamin. For the sake of upholding this goal, they could change the basis of their religious faith. With Professor Rika's love for humanity, they could even change the way their country functions.

「And of course, that country won't vanish without a trace. More accurately speaking, it's in the middle of a reorganization, and will be rebuilt after a change in personnel and structure a few days later… However, Pope Labutesuma would no longer be the leader of the Priests. That is what she wishes for. She will abdicate her leadership role to usher in the new era.」

You had worked hard,
Ikuta thought about her work so far… She had to defend her nation nimbly against the two big nations, and was the leader of the priests concerned with the future of humanity. She bore a truth she couldn’t tell anyone by herself… he couldn’t imagine how hard the years had been to her.

「And now── I don’t have any reason to let you live… The same goes for you too, right?」

Ikuta said as he watched Trisnai. The two of them had the figure of the other person reflected in their eyes.

「I have peeled off all your protective layers. No one will save you. It’s just you and me, villain.」

「……」

「If you want to survive── the only way is to take me hostage. If you succeed and link up with your agents outside, you might have a chance to escape… To do that, you need to deal with me first.」

After analyzing the conditions, Ikuta stood up from his bench. With his left hand on his walking stick, he drew his short sword with his right hand. Ikuta held the memento of the vermillion-haired girl, and pointed its tip at his mortal enemy and yelled:

「Bet your life on the line, Trisnai! Just like all the people you have toyed with!」

「――――」

The youth bared his intent to fight. As the youth watched on── the man smiled shamelessly, pouring cold water over the heated atmosphere, as if to say he didn’t want to humour the youth.

「── Calm down, Ikuta Sankrei. This is too funny. Neither of us are good with blades, fighting like this is──」

He pushed off the floor mid sentence without any signs. Trisnai charged at the youth blocking his path with unexpected speed, kicking his cane without any hesitation.

「Woah──!」

Seeing the cane rolled away from the youth’s hand, Trisnai was certain of his victory. The youth lost his balance and fell suddenly. The fox reached into his waist and grabbed a knife hidden under his shirt. Now to attack his defenceless opponent—

「…?」

They locked gazes. Ikuta stopped his fall with his left leg. The leg that should be lame from his injuries from the coup. He was supporting his body with both legs, standing firmly on the ground.

「Wooaahhh!」

The youth stared right at his opponent’s chest. Trisnai ignored the short sword lunging at his heart, and tightened the grip on his dagger instead. He timed his attack one beat slower than Ikuta, stabbing out his dagger with the determination to trade blows.

「—?」

However— the impact of the attack on his chest never landed. Instead, he felt his right wrist being grabbed, and a searing sensation on his neck.

He realized that it wasn’t a searing heat but a sharp pain, and the next moment— blood sprayed out from that man’s neck.

「— Psss—」

The knife fell from Trisnai’s hand as he pressed his hands on his neck and fell on his knees. Ikuta maintained his posture after slashing with his short sword, then looked down coldly.

「... I didn’t tell anyone, but my leg has recovered.」

He stamped on the floor firmly to show that fact. Trisnai who was desperately stemming the bleeding from his neck widened his eyes— His leg had healed? When did he recover? That was impossible. The agent he sent to spy on him didn’t give him such a report.

「— Could it be...」

The fox said with a trembling voice— the youth and the people around him kept it secret. Trisnai could only assume that. He couldn’t accept this. While he was making the arduous preparation for the final battle against Kioka, during that period when he was racing against time— this man had been

faking a lame leg just for this moment? The youth couldn’t even walk briskly just to keep up this lie!?

「The chest you showed left a deep impression, but you must be hiding a steel plate or something there, right? So I have been practicing attacking the neck without my gaze giving it away… Even though I always hated practicing melee training.」

Ikuta spat out mockingly. As he had pointed out, Trisnai was wearing a thin chainmail under his admin officer’s robe, and the filling for the cavity in his chest had been replaced with a steel plate. He wanted his opponent to aim for his chest, and even laid the groundwork for that during the coup. However, Ikuta saw through that and outwitted him.

「I severed your artery. From the blood flow, you can last a few minutes at most… I don’t intend to finish you off. You can curse and swear all you want.」

Ikuta looked down at the other party and urged quietly. The man’s pale lips started to quiver.

「... Are you, kidding me? I can’t, die in a, place like this――」

Trisnai muttered, then put strength into his waist to stand straight up. However―― his waist sank heavily and he fell on his butt with his eyes wide open in confusion.

「You are losing the sensation in your limbs, right…? Death is approaching. You are losing blood in your extremities.」

「―― Ughh――」

「You can’t stand even if you want to, huh? Your vision should be starting to blur. Soon, you will lose your orientation… It will happen in a blink of an eye. I have seen it too many times.」

The death the youth saw plenty of times on the battlefield flashed across the youth’s mind. Some cry and wail, others fall into a daze, and some leave behind a message to their loved ones, they all die in their own way. What about this man? ――Ikuta thought with a numb mind, and could see Trisnai spasming on the floor.

「... Ughh...」

「... Yes, it’s cold. Because red blood flows in your veins too.」

The man’s body temperature gradually dropped as blood flowed out from his neck. Trisnai said in a hoarse voice.

「...So cold……So cold…… So, cold……」

That was unexpectedly normal── Ikuta thought emotionlessly as he listened to the moaning. He imagined that man to have a more unique moment of death, instead of freezing slowly to death like this. He thought that man would continue spewing mad drivel or praising the Imperial family until he died. That was the monster’s image the youth imagined.

「...So cold……So cold……So cold……」

「……」

「...So cold…….Fa-ther……」

Ikuta turned stiff. He hoped he heard wrong. However── the words continued. The whimsical voice said like a frail child.

「...Father...Mother……Brother…… I’m here… I’m… here...」

He said with all his might. He wasn’t speaking to someone here, or even someone who had passed on. His enlarged pupils were no longer looking at reality. The man was looking at something he was yearning for in his heart.

「... I will be, a good boy… I will protect… His Majesty and the Imperial family...」

He continued in a fervent voice. He decided to offer everything he had. He would accomplish any mission, and endure any suffering and noteirity. He had no complaints about becoming the foundations of the Empire.

Because— To him, the Imperial family was the possibility that was taken away from him. The girl Chamille didn't have any birth defect nor lost in the race of succession, and realized the mysterious Imperial bloodline, she was the ideal form that he and his brother dreamed of. There was no way he didn't yearn for that, for him to love her. She had everything that he failed to gain. The feeling was like an amputated arm yearning for the body it belonged to.

「... So... So... One day— when I return the Empire to its former glory... When that time comes...」

— However, if he was permitted, he wanted to make just one wilful request. He knew it would never be granted, and realized long ago that even holding expectations was a sin. However, as a medal for life in service of the nation, he wanted to realize this dream. Just once was enough.

「..... Will you call me your son... your family.....?」

「———!」

Ikuta's face scowled intensely. The man was still sobbing on the verge of his death.

「...Father... I'm here...Father.....Mother...Father, Mother...」

「... Stop it.」

「...So cold...Brother...So cold.....」

「Stop talking!」

The youth cut off his death throes with a roar. Ikuta pressed his forehead with claw-like hands, and pleaded with a trembling voice.

「... Stop. Don't say something so human... at the very end.」

When he came back to his senses, he couldn't hear that voice anymore... The monster is dead, and the corpse of a human remains on the floor.

The long feud starting from his father’s generation ended, and the youth learned that this man also has his own story.

「── I’m coming in, Ikuta-nii──!」

Before the guards completely suppress the agents, Vackie and Yorga who rushed over from the capital to question Ikuta arrived on scene with ragged breath.

When they opened the door── that scene appeared before them. The exhausted youth sat in the chair, and a corpse was lying by his feet. It was Trisnai Izanma’s body.

「...Vackie and Yorga, huh? You two move fast.」

「─── Ahh───」

Vackie stopped breathing. As she looked at Trisnai on the floor with wide opened eyes, Ikuta dropped his gaze and said to his junior disciple:

「He just passed on… From the amount of blood lost, resuscitation is impossible.」

He informed her of the facts plainly, with a look of bitterness on his face.

「I know you were trying to communicate with that guy… I’m sorry for wasting your efforts.」

「..... No, I had a feeling things would end this way...」

Vackie answered with a trembling voice, then walked slowly to the body. She knelt on the floor and looked at the face of the corpse.

「... But I just can’t leave him alone. I’m not so arrogant to assume I can solve this problem… Even so, I still can’t leave this be… Because Tritri is always alone, and is detested wherever he goes… That’s too familiar to me...」

She was starting to sob. She saw the story of her life overlap with his.

「... That’s me… It’s me who didn’t meet Professor Anarai, Yoyo and Ikuta-nii when I was growing up. The me who couldn’t mingle with society, and grew up into a lonely monster...」

Vackie reached out with her fingers and gently closed the eyes of the corpse.

「... I wanted... to save him...」

Seeing the tears fall onto the face of the corpse, Ikuta thought— in this wide world, this must be the only girl who would shed tears for Trisnai Izanma. Having someone mourn his death might be a tiny salvation for this man who bore all that hatred alone.

「... This matter is finished.」

Ikuta returned the short sword cleaned of any blood back to the scabbard on his waist. Unable to accept this situation, he continued speaking to the confused Yorga:

「Committing treason by abusing the position of Field Marshal. Equivalent to a First Class War Criminal. Killing the Chancellor because of a personal grudge... There are many other crimes, but that's the gist.」

The youth plainly stated his crimes with a smile. A very clear smile.

「The traitor is right here— You two, can you bring me to the place where I should be?」

Chapter 4: Gifting You With This Warmth

Because the Jade Voice Broadcast was disseminated through all the Sprites within the Empire, Ikuta's declaration of losing the war after the Kioka forces withdrawal spread to all the citizens.

They were confused at first, followed by anxiety— the army lost. What should they do? Would the Kioka forces march into the capital tomorrow!? What would happen to them? Would they get enslaved?

But as time passed, the citizens realized the situation wasn't as bad as they imagined. They already knew that the Kioka forces had retreated. The two contradictory messages baffled them. The enemy withdrew, but the Field Marshal said the Empire lost. What was happening?

A short while later, the masses found the answer behind the contradiction. The Field Marshal intentionally lied to them about the results of the war. That wasn't the decision of the military or the will of the Empress, but an order issued by Ikuta Solork as an individual.

The citizens felt outrage. They finally realized an unbelievable thing had happened. The army that should have brought them victory had betrayed them. They sided with the enemy, leading to the Empire's defeat. For the citizens who believe blindly in the military, this was an extreme form of betrayal.

After experiencing something they had never felt before, what should they do? The people considered their options. Going by the normal procedures, the crimes of a soldier would be tried in military court. However, the culprit was the youngest Field Marshal in history, Ikuta Solork, the leader of the military with overwhelming talent. No one could expect him to be tried fairly in a military court.

In the past, they would have no choice but to swallow their grievances. Because the masses didn't have the means to try a soldier outside of a military tribunal, or have the courage to bring up their complaints with the Empress. However— they had a way now. That was an institution set up at the same time as the Parliament. Unlike the Parliament set up with the

hopes of making laws in the future, this was an institution to interpret and apply the law to individual cases— in short, a judicial branch of the government.
「The first civil court is in session— enter, defendant Ikuta Solork.」
The judge said in a firm but inexperienced voice. Surrounded by layers of courtside observers, the dark-haired youth was brought in with his hands tied behind him into the court.
「Sit him down there, and tie his hands in place. Don't let him make any suspicious move.」
Because the defendant was a soldier, the judge was very careful about the defendant being tied firmly to his chair. Ikuta Solork accepted this without any complaints. He was wearing a normal officer uniform behind his cape, and shouted in admiration:
「... This is the first time, so I was worried about how it will go, but this looks better than I expected. Well, I have never seen a Kioka court session in person, so I can't tell if there is any minor mistakes—」
「Order in the court! The defendant may only speak when spoken to!」
Ikuta said intimately as if he was visiting a friend's new house, and was rebuked by the judge. The attendees started frowning, but they were just getting started.
「... We will now begin the trial of Defendant Ikuta Solork. Prosecutor, please read out his charges.」
On his urging, a prosecutor stood up and read the document in his hand.
「I-I will read out the charges— First, Using the Jade Voice Broadcast without the Empress' permission and stating the term 『Lost the war』. Second, abetting the retreating defeated Kioka forces with that broadcast. Three, murdering the Chancellor because of personal grudges. Four—」
He read out all the charges against the defendant with a shrill voice. After reading all that, an attendee seated in the first row raised his hand.
「... On behalf of everyone present, I have a question, Your Honor.」
「You may speak.」
The judge granted permission according to the agreed procedure. The middle aged man said with a heavy voice:
「The defendant has admitted to the listed charges. Everything up to this point is fine. However— there is something I don't understand. It's simply a fact that I just can't fathom.」
He stared right at the youth, his eyes a mixture of rage and confusion. The man chose to resolve the latter part.
「Ikuta Solork. You have the trust of Her Majesty, and was bestowed the position of the youngest Field Marshal in history— so why did you do it?」
He posed an obvious question. Ikuta shrugged and said:
「Even if you ask me why, these two things have no value to me.」
「———!」
Starting with the man who asked the question, all the attendees were in an uproar. Feeling their surprise, the youth continued:

「Everyone here already knows my background, right? Don’t you think it’s strange? In normal times, a person like me will never attain the position of Field Marshal under normal manpower deployment. Being too young is one thing, but the most important reason is my family background.」
「... Are you referring to the fact that your father Bada Sankrei died in prison?」
The man then asked. However, this seemed to run contrary to the procedures, so the judge reminded the man to sit down. He then requested permission again before asking his question. This might seem tedious, but this place would fall into chaos without any rules. They were performing fine despite their unfamiliarity with the procedures, Ikuta thought. He then answered the second question:
「Honestly, I’m not interested in the reason that led to this result. I was young back then, so I don’t really remember my parents. However── being deprived of their lives enraged me. I should be the son of a high ranking army officer, and grow up in such an environment, right? People suddenly interfered and destroyed my life, so that’s the reason why I hated the Empire.」
The youth said without any fear. Another young man raised his hand right after, and said after getting permission:
「... Your parents died because of the nobles' poor management, which are grounds for sympathy. However── Her Majesty has given you enough favour to make up for it. And now, you are rising to new heights as an unique hero of the Empire. You can get anything that you want. Am I wrong?」
The man was sincerely baffled, and his words made Ikuta smile sarcastically.
「Favour… Favour, huh.」
「... What’s wrong about that?」
The young man said disgruntledly. The youth answered loudly:
「I have enough of being the nanny of that naive blonde brat.」
The place was in an uproar once again. Before he was asked a new question, Ikuta continued speaking:
「Hear ye, hear ye. The girl puts on a facade of a tyrant, but is actually a stupidly nice person. No matter what we talked about, she would keep droning about the happiness of the masses and the obligations of a ruler, how annoying. Because of her rigid stance against corruption, it takes me a lot of effort to take some change from the treasury, which is not worth the effort I put in.」
The youth sighed exaggeratingly. The attendees were all slack jawed from shock.
「Even if I just want to indulge in carnal pleasure, her skinny figure doesn’t fit my fetish. Oh── but since I had the chance, I should have pushed myself to impregnate her, huh? Mixing my bloodline into that wretched Imperial family, just thinking about that── Ughh!」

A full thud cut him off. An attendee threw a bottle of ink at the youth, hitting his shoulder and staining his uniform black. With that, the emotions of the crowd erupted.
「Shut him up! Shut that bastard up!」「No, hang him right now!」
「Stop kidding us, you jerk!」
「The hero we have been admiring is actually such a brute...?」
The attendees started shouting and throwing things, and the youth was tied with his hands behind his back, and couldn't even shield his body. Seeing that the place was losing control, the judge slammed his gavel and shouted:
「Order! Order in the court! Do not throw things in the court── take the Defendant away for now! We can't have a trial like this...!」
The court staff carried out their instruction, untying him from the chair and dragged the youth away. The shouts and curses didn't stop until he vanished from sight.
「── S-Sir...」
To prevent the Defendant from being lynched, when Ikuta was being moved, the army sent out a few escorts to keep watch. However, what Major Megu, one of the escorts, saw was the terrible sight of the youth's uniform being covered in ink.
「Like I said, you don't have to address me as Sir, Major Megu── by the way, it got more intense than I expected. They got agitated too easily, but it's great that the attendees are passionate.」
Ikuta said contently. The soldiers didn't know what to say and fell silent, and he picked up a fountain pen caught in the crevice of his clothes.
「Here. I don't know who threw it, but this pen isn't cheap. I hope you can return this to its owner.」
He said as he handed the fountain pen to a court staff. Unable to watch any longer, Major Megu blinked tears away from his eyes.
「... Why? Why are you subjected to such...!」
Facing Major Megu who was groaning with his shoulders quivering, Ikuta smiled wryly.
「This is a reasonable treatment for a traitor── Well then, can you gentlemen please escort me back to my beautiful cell? If I show my face again, I might lose my life.」
The youth said calmly before walking off. Major Megu couldn't tell what he was thinking, but he still followed the youth to shield him from further humiliation.
Smack! The sharp sound of a slap on a cheek echoed out loud. The Empress was inside her office in one corner of the palace, and she was glaring at the admin officer girl blocking her path── Vackie.
「I will only say this again── Let me see Solork right now!」
Chamille's voice was filled with rage. Vackie's cheek was stinging from that slap, but she was unfazed and answered:

「I won’t lose to that and will repeat myself── I can’t let you meet Ikuta-nii. That’s what he wants, and it can’t be helped politically either. You should know why.」
Ughh, the Empress had no words. At the same time, Yorga rushed to Vackie’s side and prostrated:
「… Your Majesty, please make your decision calmly. The effect of Ikuta making the wilful declaration that we lost the war has gone beyond the scope of the military, and is still expanding. If you contact Ikuta now, it will definitely make the citizens misunderstand. They will turn their anger towards you, and the governance system will fall apart…!」
The bespectacled youth said with a pained voice. What he said made Chamille raise the corners of her eyes from anger.
「Wilful── You said wilful? Are you kidding me!? That declaration was originally──」
Her words were cut off suddenly. An index finger pressing on the Empress’ lips stopped her from speaking. Vackie stared at her from close up, then said clearly:
「「Never say the rest of that sentence」. Can you do that, Chamille?」
「──!」
These words that carried strong implications made Chamille hold her breath. Vackie leaned to her ears and whispered:
「… We are friends, so I can somewhat guess the situation. The position that Ikuta-nii and you are in, should be swapped, right?」
Chamille’s heart pounded wildly. The Empress who realized that her secret was out looked at Vackie in shock, and the white coat girl continued in a quiet voice:
「Ikuta-nii snatched away your role at the last moment… I understand that you want to hear his explanation. However, you need to consider your own circumstances. He took your role, which means you have to take his too. Are you going to see Ikuta-nii even with that in mind?」
「……!」
「For now, he will be transferred between the Judicial Court and prison. However── you won’t have much free time either. Aside from the post war issues, the territories ravaged by the war need to be repaired too… That’s the job of the Empress. You know that you can’t abandon your duties.」
When Vackie mentioned her obligations as the monarch, Chamille could no longer resist. As Chamille stood there stiffly, the girl embraced Chamille tightly.
「I’m sorry for saying all those detestable things, Chamille… I won’t let you endure that for too long. I will arrange for you to meet Ikuta-nii in the future. I promise── but please endure it for now…」
Vackie’s plea made Chamille lower her gaze. As for the matter of Ikuta── she couldn’t do anything but to believe Vackie.
At the same time, a group of serious officers were gathered in the conference room of the Central Base.

「... Looks like the main members are all here.」
General Remeon who was standing in the deepest end of the room declared. The attendees before him included his old friend Honorary Field Marshal Igsem, General Shiba, the members of the Knights Corp, Torway, Matthew and Haro, and First Lieutenant Suya Mittokarifu. The criteria of the attendees was how close they were to Ikuta Solork.
「I will ask again. Do anyone knows what he is planning?」
The jade-eyed General tried to ask in a calm voice. He took the initiative to chair this meeting because he was the least involved with Ikuta. Silence hung over the room.
「Nothing, huh… Then I will assume no one is lying.」
After that warning-like opening line, General Remeon raised a topic to push the conversation forward.
「First off, I don't understand his intentions. Who stands to gain from insisting that a victory is a loss?」
More silence. He noticed that everyone had the same question, but the jade-eyed General continued speaking:
「Assuming── I don't want to say this, but assuming that he is colluding with Kioka all along, and is attempting to use his position as Field Marshal to benefit the enemy nation. But, why now? For example, he could have picked the moment when Kioka won, or when the Empire is on the brink of defeat, there are better opportunities to do so effectively. But choosing to betray us after executing his detailed plans in a display of wits, I don't get his timing.」
In response to General Remeon's confused question, Matthew reacted for the first time:
「... He doesn't want the Empire to be destroyed. But he didn't want the Empire to win either.」
The slightly plump youth muttered. The jade-eyed General turned his sharp eyes toward him.
「...Major Matthew, what do you mean by that?」
「I'm just saying what came to my mind. But it's only natural to think so. Be it good or bad, that guy won't do illogical things… He must have some goal in mind for the current situation and his declaration of defeat.」
Matthew said, basing off his impression of Ikuta. General Remeon groaned.
「He doesn't want the Empire to win? ... If that deduction is on point, then his intention is beyond that of a soldier from the very start.」
When she heard that, an image flashed suddenly across Haro's mind.
「... Her Majesty...?」
She wasn't trying to speak, and spoke on reflex. General Remeon turned to her stiffly.
「... What were you saying, Major Becker?」
「... Oh, no, I was just thinking── because that sound more like how Her Majesty would think...」
Haro wasn't confident and said with a stutter. As the content was sensitive, the jade-eyed General couldn't probe further.

「...Major, you need to be careful with your words――」
「It's fine. Go on, Major Becker.」
Honorary Field Marshal Igsem who had been silent so far urged Haro to continue on Remeon's behalf. General Remeon looked at his old friend in surprise, and Haro said after carefully mincing her words:
「... Well, how should I put this? Since the very beginning, Her Majesty has had a strong sense of self reproach. I don't mean just herself, but the entire Empire's current situation―― ah, I'm sorry, I can't explain properly with words――」
「I know the gist of what Haro-san is saying. Anyway―― you don't think winning the war against Kioka, seizing territories and expanding our borders to bring prosperity to the Empire is the wish of Her Majesty… Correct?」
Torway added as he tried to explain on behalf of Haro. When he heard what his son was saying, anxiety appeared on General Remeon's face.
「Hold on, wait. If we follow that line of thought… It's as if Her Majesty wants this to happen, right?」
The atmosphere suddenly turned dangerous. General Shiba said as if to warn them:
「I met Her Majesty a few hours ago… Honestly speaking, she is panicking. Unless my eyes are failing me, I don't think that is an act.」
「I think so too. That's why―― the deduction must be half wrong.」
Torway probed deeper. He could feel something from the dark-haired youth and the Empress, and that was slowly taking shape in his mind.
「This is what Her Majesty wanted. However―― a mistake resulted in a decisive difference, and Her Majesty couldn't correct it with her power… If that is correct, that will explain why Her Majesty is in such a panic. That's my opinion on this.」
The reasons behind their present situation was both the youth and the Empress, not just one of them―― Torway was certain of that, which even surprised himself… However, at this stage, his opinion lacked solid evidence. General Remeon calmly said:
「...That's enough speculation. I don't think adding assumptions on top of assumptions will bring us closer to the truth. Anyway, we need to focus on getting him back from the judicial court.」
「I concur, but it's not that simple… From his attitude during the trial, he had no intention of backing out of the trial.」
General Shiba said bitterly. They all knew that Ikuta's actions during the first day of the trial made the masses absolutely loathe him. Torway said after deep contemplation:
「... Can't we get him back by using more forceful means? Ik-kun is a soldier, so I think it stands to reason that he should be tried by military tribunal instead of the judicial court.」
「That is normally the case, but he is a Field Marshal. A special case who was appointed at a very young age, who even became the mental support of

the Imperial army. Nobody thinks that the military tribunal will try him in an impartial manner. If we demand them to hand him over, that is as good as showing our intentions to cover up his crimes.」
Torway fell silent at General Shiba's answer. Matthew beside him proposed immediately:
「... What about Her Majesty? The judicial court itself didn't even exist a few years ago? Having the Supreme Court try political criminals was the norm back then. If Her Majesty ask for that guy back──」
「Isn't Her Majesty the one who dissolved the Supreme Court infested by the corrupt nobles, and handed the authority to try criminals to the judicial court? … The Parliament and Judicial court are the symbol of Her Majesty's impartialness and just character. If she took a criminal away by force, the people's trust in Her Majesty would crumble. Insisting for just Ikuta Solork to be tried in a Supreme Court is just a pipe dream. That's as good as declaring he is guilty and letting him get away scot free.」
General Shiba's words made Matthew speechless. Getting Ikuta back from the judicial court might seem simple, but the more he considered it, the harder it was to pull it off. They had realized by now that even this situation was part of the youth's scheme. He intentionally put himself outside
「……」
「── Hey wait, Suya-san? Where are you going?」
Seeing the results of their discussion, Suya turned and walked off with an unsteady gait. When Haro called out to her, she stopped stiffly.
「... Go where? Yes, where was I going?」
She said in a stutter as she turned to Haro and the others. Her face was shaking with a mixture of complicated emotions.
「I'm not sure either. More importantly── I will get into trouble if I keep going.」
At that moment, the others realized how dangerous she was. General Remeon immediately gave an order:
「Major Becker, restrain her!」
「Y-Yes!」
Responding to that order, Haro grabbed Suya from behind. Suya didn't struggle, but it was clear from her trembling body that her self restraint was at her limits. General Remeon looked down with a pained face at Suya who was breathing raggedly.
「... It can't be helped. She trusted him more than anyone else, and came so far under his guidance. Regardless of rank, there are many people who took things as hard as First Lieutenant Mittokarifu… The truth of the matter aside, he had the responsibility of explaining things. We have to start by asking him what he really thinks… Who's going?」
The jade-eyed General asked solemnly. That question made everyone look at each other with heavy eyes.
「

As the Empire descended into further confusion because of that youth, something was happening in the Kioka Republic Capital Norandot far to the east. In a general hospital to the north of the capital, a youth woke up from his long slumber in one of the rooms.

「..... Mmm..... Mmm.....」

He opened his eyes a little, and saw a white ceiling. Just from that, he knew this place had the peace and cleanliness impossible on the battlefield. He turned his gaze, and saw a familiar woman pouring water into a vase by the window.

「..... Miara, what are you doing.....?」

「——— Huh?」

Miara suddenly froze. She hesitated, wondering if she was hearing things, then turned timidly towards Jean a few seconds later. Her bespectacled eyes met with Jean—

「— Uwah?」

The next moment, Jean's body was locked in her tight embrace. Ignoring his surprise, Miara put more strength into her arms, as if to say she would never let go.

「... I'm so glad...! I-I thought it's really over...!」

「Huh? Ehh—?」

「I will get the doctor! Stay right there!」

He thought she would never let go, and the next moment, she rushed out of his room. Jean watched her go with a stupefied face.

「... Sorry, I remember now.」

The doctor came to check on him after getting news that he had woken up. After confirming that Jean was more or less in good health, Jean had more or less realized the condition his body was in.

「I have memories, but I'm not sure whether they are dreams or reality. Can you explain, Miara?」

「Of course… So please have a good rest.」

Miara said in an urgent tone. He nodded, and she started to explain:

「The war has stopped for now. When you lost consciousness, we had to abandon our plans to invade the Empire because of many factors including the Navy's defeat, which meant having no reinforcements, and withdrew all forces back to Kioka. This is a special room in a general hospital in Norandot. After collapsing in headquarters, you have slept for over a month.」

Jean gritted his teeth at Miara's words. He had a gut feeling, but hearing about these facts still dealt a big blow to him.

「As expected, huh? ...I lost the most important war?」

The sense of reality welled up a bit later. However— without waiting for him to blame himself, Miara cut him off and continued:

「It's true that we are just one step away from reaching the capital, but stopped just short… However, this isn't Jean's responsibility alone.」

The white-haired officer looked at her in a daze. Miara's eyes were wavering from sadness.
「I realized that the war was lost when you collapsed. We couldn't recover after losing the path to victory… That was how most of the officers felt. And the proof is, aside from me taking temporary command as your adjutant, no one had the initiative to take over command.」
「……」
「We pushed too many things for you to handle. Be it formulating strategy, frontline command and mental support── we focus all that on you alone, so when you collapse, everything fell apart… We should have divided the work and cooperated more. If we let the people on the grounds make the judgement call, or cut down the Sprite communication by half, you wouldn't have collapsed.」
From her tone, Jean could tell that she had regretted and reflected on things over and over again. And right now, he didn't have the words to refute her.
「… Yes. That's the reason behind our loss.」
「──Jean.」
「I thought I could fight til the end. That I could command the entire Kioka army perfectly. And then, I wouldn't lose… However, I hit the limit of my abilities before I realized it. I couldn't handle the large numbers of troops moving around in multiple battlefields with my brain alone, and the battle became more complicated in the latter half of the war. I forced myself to do so, and ended up losing the war… It's as you say, Miara.」
Jean's clenched fist quivered on his knee. However── after troubling over it for a while, Miara shook her head.
「… It's still not clear whether we really lost.」
「… Huh?」
「I'm too sure either. We retreated without capturing the capital, which might seem like we lost… However, a strange thing happened after that. The Empire one sidedly declared they lost the war.」
After learning this unexpected fact from her, Jean opened his eyes wide in surprise.
「Lost the war…? Wait, that's──」
He was about to state his question when frantic footsteps came from the corridor. Jean turned to look, and found a familiar buffed man opening the door.
「Ohh, you really are awake!」
Harrah shouted when he saw the youth sitting up on his bed. His adjutant who was petite in contrast leaned out from behind him. Jean was happy to see them.
「Harrah, Sergeant Major Mita…! You're both safe!」
「I actually got hospitalized after taking a bullet to the shoulder! Speaking of which, you slept for a really long time! Are you trying to make up for not sleeping all this while!?」

Harrah said as he pointed at his bandaged left shoulder. When he heard that, Jean finally realized the change that occurred to him.
「... I see. I fell asleep?」
The youth muttered in a daze. For Jean Arkinex who was famous for being an insomniac, this was a big change. Jean wasn't sure what to make of this and fell silent, and Sergeant Major Mita leaned forth and looked at his face.
「You look well, boss. I was surprised when I heard that you fainted, but it's good that you had a good rest, right?」
「... You make it sound simple, but I felt really uneasy. Because the doctor wasn't sure if the patient will ever wake up...」
Miara let out a deep sigh and grumbled. At this moment, someone knocked on the door, and everyone looked over.
「Excuse me」 you have guests from the military, may they come in...?」
The nurse asked reservedly. Miara raised a hand to stop Jean who was about to agree on reflex and answered:
「Jean just woke up, and his condition isn't stable. Please inform them about that and send them away. If they want to leave a message, tell them to talk to Miara Gin.」
「Hmm? Miara, I'm alright——」
If it's just speaking with visitors, I'll be fine.
When Jean was about to say that, his adjutant smiled at him, which gave him goosebumps.
「I already said I'm very worried about you. You can't even get up from bed, and you think you're healthy enough?」
「Ehh? Ahh, no.」
「Listen up—— a patient must rest obediently.」
「——*Yah*
*.」
Her oppressing aura made Jean nod. After that, Miara said that visiting for today was over, and chased Harrah and Sergeant Major Mita out of the room.
A few days later, Jean's condition improved a lot, and Miara was less paranoid about visitors. And on the fifth day, the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 came to visit the youth and got to meet him.
「—— I'm relieved that you're awake. I never thought you'd sleep for a month.」
Elulufay said as she peels an apple she brought for the visit. Greg stood behind her—— because he ran into Harrah who came to visit earlier, the two of them were pressuring each other silently. Leaving the quarrels between the two buff men asice, Jean bowed his head to the Great Mother in apology.
「... I'm sorry, Rear Admiral Tenerexilla. It's all because I abandoned my command.」
「Don't say that, I don't have the right to complain either. If I had been the Fleet Admiral, the naval battle might have turned out differently.」

Elulufay took some responsibility for the defeat with a natural tone. To Jean, that moved him more than anything else. She handed a diced apple to him, then bit into one piece with a crunch.
「However, I don't really understand the situation there. I heard the Imperial Army made a mysterious announcement that they lost the war, and didn't pursue the retreating Kioka army. Thanks to that, more troops returned home safely than we expected── but what actually happened back then?」
Jean crossed his arms in deep thought alongside the baffled Elulufay. In the quiet room, the two buffed men clashed their gazes for the upteenth time.
「... Huhhh?」
「Hmmm?」
「Greg, don't fight in the patient's room── the Parliament is in chaos too. It is unclear whether they won or lost the war, so they can't decide whether to praise or blame Ario. Diplomatic talks with the Empire are happening under the table, and they are evasive in their talks. They seem to have an emergency on hand.」
The Great Mother stated plainly. Miara who was listening quietly interjected:
「... Another military coup? Like the Hioredo ore mines.」
「... Probably not. The declaration was made with their Jade Voice Broadcast, and it was Solork's voice, right?If it is a coup, that means that guy betrayed his country. However...」
At that, a piece of memory surfaced in Jean's mind. When he abused his brain to the limit and was about to lose consciousness, he had a conversation with Ikuta. That couldn't be reality── he knew that was a delusion created by his exhausted mind. Even so, the words from the dark-haired youth left a deep impression on him.
「... Was he bidding farewell...?」
「Hmm?」
Elulufay who was unaware of all that looked puzzlely at Jean who was talking to himself. The youth had no intention to talk about his delusion and shook his head quietly.
「... It's nothing. To be frank, I can't imagine what the inner workings of the Empire is right now. We can only pay attention to the progress of our diplomatic team, and strengthen our defences as soldiers. I will visit the army right now.」
「Jean, like I said, you're not...!」
Jean looked as if he could be discharged from the hospital at any moment, and Miara shouted with a face of worry. Elulufay looked at the two of them, and tried to interject nonchalantly:
「Miara has already submitted the report, yes? Then there's no point in you rushing back. Just like with Ario, the higher ups aren't sure how to treat you. Right now, they don't know whether you're a hero that won the war, or

a general of a defeated army. What kind of work do you think will be assigned to such an officer?
... Ughh...
I hope you can stay low before the assessment is clear, that should be what the top brass would want too. I suggest that you go all out and just enjoy your vacation. You have been overly invested in your work, so isn't this a good chance?
She used this logic to make resting a natural choice. Just like Miara, she didn't want Jean to return to his insomniac lifestyle. As a Kioka citizen brought in by Ario Kyakushii— Elulufay secretly thought of the youth as her little brother.
No matter how the diplomacy between us and the Empire progresses, there is one thing that is certain— there won't be any large-scale war in the near future. Both Kioka and the Empire spent too much of their national power in this final battle. The anti-war sentiment is gaining momentum, and the Empire isn't foolish enough to mobilize their exhausted army to launch a punitive war. The era of war is at an end— I can't say that for sure, but at the very least, it will stop for a while.
The Great Mother said confidently. She looked out the window and continued quietly:
The rest will be the realm of politics… I plan to get my feet wet in that direction.
— Huh?
I will tell you when I have a concrete plan. Alright then— it will be bad if you get tired from talking so much, let's call it a day for today. Let's go, Greg. I did tell you not to fight, but why are you two playing thumb wrestling with such scary faces?
She got up and tugged at Greg's sleeve, then left the room. Jean watched them go, then pondered with his hands on his chin for some time.

Neither the Empress nor the army could calm the situation down, and the capital remained stuck somewhere between war and peace. Under such circumstances, Ikuta Solork went through his fifth hearing, and the atmosphere was as tense as the first day.
... I want to ask the Defendant, when did you start deceiving Her Majesty?
The attendee asked a new question. The content made the youth lift his head with a groan.
Hmm this is a troubling question. When I first met her, I had always been thinking about using that girl to rake in cash, but you are asking when I started deceiving her… To be honest, I don't know when. It's a pain, so why don't you guys decide instead?
His words were a mixture of arrogance and resignation, which made him very detestable. Everyone in attendance roared with rage. People were throwing things on this day too.

□Order in the court! Do not throw things at the Defendant! …Defendant Solork, your answer is too inciteful. Answer with sincerity. Your actions will result in a heavier sentence, and you should know that.□
□Like~ I~ said~, I'm tired of putting on an act, that's why I'm telling you my true feelings. I shouldn't have gone with the flow and took on the role of Field Marshal. If I got a more relaxed position, I could have held that post for a long time… Hmm? Doesn't mean this isn't my fault?□
Ikuta said as if he just thought that. Immediately after that, a paperweight hit him heavily in the forehead.
□… That hurts… It's fine to throw things, but don't use steel lumps. My hands are tied behind me, you know.□
After the hearing ended, the youth was sent back to his cell, and he said while nursing his forehead. At this moment── majestic footsteps broke the silence.
□If you really think so, then don't say things that will make them throw things at you, Regimental Commander.□
The one speaking to him was General Kubalha Shiba, a family friend since his father's generation. Ikuta welcomed him with exaggerated movements.
□Welcome to my beautiful cell── So you are the first one, General Shiba?□
□That's right… We can send a member of the □Knights Corp□ too, but the person who can talk to you calmly at this stage is me. Simply because I'm old and experienced.□
□Haha, that's true. If it's Matthew, he would have punched me before we even speak.□
□It's good that you understand. The next person will be First Lieutenant Mittokarifu.□
□..... That makes me shiver.□
The youth who had a vague attitude said with a serious expression at that. General Shiba laughed softly and looked around him.
□But there's no one here. I thought this place will be under surveillance all the time.□
□On the surface, that should be the case… But when Chamille set up the Judicial Court, I was involved in the appointment of personnel. Frankly speaking, the guards are all old faces. They won't eavesdrop on us, so don't worry.□
Ikuta promised despite being a prisoner. General Shiba nodded, and sat down before the iron bars.
□I see… Looks like we can speak freely.□
□So we have to make things clear, huh?□
□Yes. If you are going to fudge things over with me like you did during the hearings── I will have to punch your head on behalf of Bada.□
The man said as he blew on his clenched right fist. Ikuta grabbed his head with both hands.
□Spare me, Uncle Shiba, your fist will rack my brains.□
□Then tell me everything── Hey, Ikuta, why are you doing this?□

General Shiba said in a firm tone, as if he was warning a mischievous nephew. Ikuta smiled awkwardly.
「... Any pretense is futile before you, huh.」
He said in awe, then sat up straight and turned towards Shiba. That was his way of saying that he was serious now.
「As you said, I have my reasons. However— aside from that, I can't reveal anything else… just admitting that is a close shave for me. Don't think too much, and if possible, don't try to guess my reasons.」
The youth said cryptically. General Shiba stared into his eyes and said:
「— You took her role?」
Silence hung over them. Ikuta's expression didn't change. However, General Shiba could tell from the tone of this silence that he hit the jackpot.
「...That's it? ...I didn't want to guess it right… So that's the reason?」
General Shiba accepted this with a sigh, and probed further.
「... When did you started 「this」?」
「... At the end of the first mock battle. That's when I got involved.」
「That means she had such thoughts much earlier than that. And that's... Oh, I see. In Kioka, huh?」
「Worse of all, a guy over there fanned the flame. Be it in the Empire or in Kioka… That child has always been targeted by troublesome people.」
Ikuta said with a bitter face. Since he had been seen through, there was no point in hiding any further. He continued:
「Sigh, this is just half the reason. The other half is that I just want to do so.」
The youth said firmly. When General Shiba heard this, he looked puzzled for the first time.
「... What do you mean?」
「I mean it literally. Saving this country isn't my goal. More accurately speaking, I have never thought about saving this country. That's why… this situation is what I wanted too.」
The youth said with a lonely smile. He thought about his encounter with the blonde girl— that seemed to be a lifetime away, and he thought about how he got to this stage.
「I couldn't reject that invitation… Thinking back, I already reached my answer back then.」
Late that night, in the Central Military Base. Too impatient to wait until the next morning, the officers attempting to take Ikuta back gathered in the same conference room as last time.
「After speaking with him, I confirmed many things… With that in mind, I realized that the situation is terrible.」
General Shiba, who had met Ikuta, said to everyone. The faces of the group turned stiff, and Shiba continued:
「He plans to push this situation to the extreme. Everything he said during the trial was intentional, he wasn't shaken, confused, or desperate. He is the same Ikuta Solork as always… That's why, it will be extremely difficult to stop him.」

General Shiba expressed his pessimistic view. After thinking about it for a moment, Matthew asked:
「... What did he say about the defeat declaration?」
「He said he had his reasons. And that is what he wanted… It's hard for me to tell you the specifics. Even the people here shouldn't seek the truth with an easy heart.」
His words shook everyone. Suya was the first to rebuke:
「... Are you saying that some of us is not taking this seriously?」
She said in a low growl. Seeing that she was staring at him without even blinking, and the others who had similar faces, General Shiba realized his mistake and shook his head.
「... All of you are very serious about this, I have misspoken. Alright then── Major Becker and Lieutenant Colonel Torway made the deduction that the 『Declaration of Defeat should have been issued by Her Majesty』. That is true.」
He told everyone. At that moment, a theory had been proven. Everyone's faces turned stiff, and Matthew said with a trembling voice:
「... Really?」
「Do not leak this out. I'm not exaggerating, this will lead to the collapse of the nation.」
General Shiba warned sternly. He delved deeper into the truth.
「Saving the country by losing the war. It's hard to accept as a soldier, but that's the Empres' plan… The Empire's old social structure, the relationship between politics, military and citizens── The Empire is certain that there is no future in all that. So she set up the Parliament, reformed all sorts of systems, and the Declaration of Defeat must be her last method. Her Majesty wants to betray the masses, and get executed by the enraged crowd to start a revolution──」
「... However── Ikuta took her role.」
Torway interjected quietly, and General Shiba nodded firmly. At this moment, General Remeon said:
「... You are saying their roles are reversed? So Her Majesty should be the one to be executed, and Ikuta Solork, the person she trusts the most will support the immature Parliament and guide the nation into the future. Even though as the Field Marshal, this is just slightly different from a Military junta── no, that is the reason why he is chosen. Her Majesty hopes the Parliament will mature into a government body while the unambitious Field Marshal is in charge.」
「The timing of the Jade Voice Broadcast decided everything. Once the declaration has been made, the other party can't make the same move. Because that won't leave anyone to shoulder the future of the nation.」
Honorary Field Marshal Igsem added. Haro also shared her thoughts:
「... Her Majesty probably didn't discuss the Declaration of Defeat with Ikuta-san. Because he will stop her if she does. She has been planning in secret without letting anyone know, but Ikuta-san saw through her.」

…… After seeing through that plan, it’s easy to make the declaration ahead of her. And since he is the Field Marshal, he will be the first to learn about the war’s development. He just needed to grasp the timing of the Kioka army giving up on the invasion and retreating, Her Majesty will be a step late in getting this information…
Matthew said through gritted teeth. Haro raised her head in shock after hearing that.
…… In the state of national emergency, the Field Marshal can use the Jade Voice Broadcast. I remember hearing Her Majesty and Ikuta-san discussing that. I thought that was a part of the preparation for the final battle with Kioka… Now that I think about it, that is a foreshadowing of him making the Declaration of Defeat before Her Majesty.
Thinking back, there were many signs. But they didn’t suspect anything at that time. That showed how careful Ikuta was in hiding his plan.
I get the gist now── so, what will happen to him?
Suya asked for the conclusion. General Shiba answered:
His attitude during the judicial court made things clear… From getting tried by the citizens and being executed, that is the duty of the one who made that declaration.
His conviction was clear. The youth wouldn’t abandon the position he had taken over from the Empress.
He has the determination to die, and is walking towards the execution grounds── That’s the decision Ikuta Solork made to let Empress Chamille live.
── That means, you have been hiding your ambitions from your comrades too?
Someone asked the youth during the 8th trial. Since the focus of the participants had shifted to his relationship with Knights Corp, Ikuta had to answer with caution.
…… Sigh, that’s right. I considered roping them in, but they aren’t that type of person. Really now, it’s really suffocating to be surrounded by goody two shoes.
Ikuta stuck his tongue out. He claimed that he was only intimate with them on the surface, but had always kept his heart closed to them. Most of the attendees accepted his claims, since this didn’t contradict their impression of the youth so far.
Even so, you are brothers in arms on the battlefield who entrust your lives to each other── don’t you feel guilty? They all look up to you, and trust you while they fought under you.
He questioned Ikuta’s conscience. So when Ikuta answered── he played the role of someone without any conscience.
That’s exactly why you shouldn’t trust people easily.
Nothing was thrown at him this time. Gazes filled with hatred and conceit glared at the youth from all directions.

「... My poor conduct since my Officer Cadet days played out well. The more they investigate how I acted in the army, the stronger their impression that 『this guy might really be capable of that』.」
Ikuta muttered while he was lying on his bed in his cell── it would be easy to leave a bad impression in the trial with his glib tongue. He just needs to understand what kind of villain they wanted, and act in accordance to their expectations. He thought with a bitter smile that it suited him better than being a saint.
「Sigh, so the trial will continue in this direction── hmm?」
The youth felt a gust of wind on his cheek, and his gaze fell onto the other side of the steel bars. A few seconds later── two sets of footsteps on the stone floor echoed out loud. The ones who appeared before him── were his furious disciple and the vermillion-haired general.
「.....」
「So it's your turn huh, Suya? And I understand why Honorary Field Marshal Igsem is accompanying you.」
The two of them approached Ikuta who had a cramped smile── Suya who walked right up to the bars grabbed the youth's collar suddenly. Ikuta back dashed in the nick of time on reflex. The right hand that failed to catch its prey was shaking before him in frustration.
「No, wait── don't get in my face right off the bat, at least hear out my excuse.」
「After I hear you out, will that convince me to forgive you?」
「... Probably not. But your urge to punch me a hundred times might decrease to around eighty. I think that's a significant difference── both for my face and your fists.」
Ikuta said after sensing a pressing danger to his life. Suya stared right at him, then put down her arm a while later.
「... I got the gist of what happened. You betrayed the nation in the place of Her Majesty, and ended up in jail.」
「That's about right. However── this is also what I wanted. I hope you can respect this part.」
Ikuta said seriously, but Suya didn't care── No matter whose wish or whom it was done for, he had already done the deed. It didn't change the fact that he sought out death with no regard for himself.
「... What about the Rising Sun Regiment? It's not dissolved yet, right?」
「Hmm. Well── it will be dissolved this time. With that incident with my father and what I did, the unit with these two ominous incidents won't serve any good for anyone.」
「.....」
「Rather than this, you should think about yourself. You are my beloved disciple── hmm, should I use the past tense here too?── you are in an awkward position right now. If you act rashly, you might get affected by me. So hide in the military base in the meantime.」

Ikuta advised her after considering the situation. When Suya heard that, she showed a scary smile.
「... You── are completely looking down on me.」
「.....」
「Do you think I'm some bitch who will hide quietly just because you said so? It's the opposite── if you are strongly against it, I will go all in.」
Suya made a declaration of war with a dangerous gleam in her eyes.
「Anyway, we can just start another coup with the Rising Sun Regiment. Yes, I will do that. If the truth gets out, the members of the 『Knights Corp』 and General Shiba will definitely join in. General Remeon and even Field Marshal Igsem here might help us with a little convincing. From the very start, no one wants you to die?」
「... Ugh.」
「If we rope in these people, it won't just be a coup. The judicial coup will be abolished, and the noisy Parliament will be scrapped too, and the army will take you back within a day. Hmm── the more I think about it, the easier it is, huh? A military junta is simple and straightforward, how nice.」
Suya laughed with her head low. Her eyes glared up at Ikuta from below.
「── You are sweating a lot, Regimental Commander.」
「Yes, I'm very anxious. Because you will do what you say.」
「It's good that you understand. Well then, I will be off for now. I will come back with an army next time, so wait──」
Suya turned to leave, but her wrist was grabbed tightly. She turned back in confusion, and looked at the youth's hand that was grabbing her hand tightly.
「... Why are you pulling me?」
「Don't go, let's talk a little more.」
「What's the use of talking? You can't persuade me.」
「Yes, I know. We have known each other for so long after all.」
「... Then what's the point of talking──!」
Suya was about to raise her voice, but the words got stuck in her throat. She could see the crushing pain in the youth's eyes.
「Talking about anything is fine. I just── want to hear your voice. I want to see your every move… This will probably be the last time I will meet directly with you.」
「────!」
「I really won't try to convince you. Because── I have no intentions of backing down. I have already decided on what to do, and just shamelessly forced you guys to go along with me after the fact. I don't have the right to ask for your understanding… and you can't change the inevitable results either.」
「... What is this? You think I can't start a coup?」
「That's right. As for the reason… First, General Shiba and General Remeon will stop you. The Declaration of Defeat had been made, so someone has to

take responsibility for treason, and they understand that. On that premise… I don’t intend for anyone aside from me to shoulder the responsibility.
And the second reason. You might not realize yet— but you can’t betray Chamille’s effort either. You already know how hard she worked, and the support she gave you to enrol in the Officer Cadet School… Suya Mittokarifu can’t ignore all that.」
Ikuta said confidently. His ironic trust made Suya clenched her fists.
「... I have to give in to that child again?」
「...Suya.」
「Another time? Just like the coup, my feelings are secondary again? You want me to accept that?... Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me— Are you kidding me!?」
She screamed and reached through the bars. Ikuta didn’t dodge, and Suya grabbed his shoulders.
「Look at me! Look at Suya Mittokarifu who is right here! Other people don't matter, I don’t give a shit about the nation’s future! This is my life! I came here because I prioritize my feelings first!」
「.....」
「— If I can’t start a coup, I will start a riot with my subordinates who want to support me! It’s the same thing anyway. I just need to attack this place and abduct you by force! I don’t care if I die, my feelings will live until that moment! I will do everything I can and use all that I have— I will only accept it after that! Accept the frustration in my heart! Accept the feelings stirring because of you! Or else, these emotions will keep smothering in my heart...!」
Suya poured her heart out anxiously— the fire that couldn’t be put out continued to hurt her. She screamed that she was suffering because of him. The immature feelings that couldn’t evolve into admiration or love, was mixed together with jealousy into a twisted aggressiveness. She couldn’t stop weeping from her own helplessness and despair. Because she knew that she was being true to herself, and this was something she wouldn’t back down from.
「— During meals, you’ll start with juicy fruits.」
The youth’s voice entered her ears. Her hands on his shoulders froze in place.
「If there isn’t any, you will eat the vegetable, and if there isn’t any, you will take a sip of water. You eat fast, but your dining etiquette isn't bad. You like spicy food and southern style vegetable stew, and are actually a little unhappy that others don’t appreciate the taste. You think the dishes served in the base’s mess hall aren't spicy enough. On the other hand, you like iced desserts and tea that are really sweet.」
「.....」
「You have a strong attitude towards your superiors and peers, but treat your subordinates much gentler. Is your guidance on point? Are you directing them towards a better path?— You will think about that when

training your men, and will take notes. You’re a little bad with small animals, but you don’t hate them. You’re just keeping your distance because you’ll grow attached to them.」
Ikuta continued like a parent watching the growth of his child.
「After we are reunited in the army again, I have been watching you with an indescribable warm emotion that I don’t even understand myself—
Watching your decisions, your struggles, and your growth.
You really hate me in the start. Your personality is completely different from mine, and is hardworking and honest— that’s why when we got to know each other, I was really happy when you accepted the way I did things.
Conveying my thoughts to others and letting my way of thinking continue to live on in the mind of others— for me, that’s a blissful thing.」
The youth said as he held her hands that were on her shoulders. As if to express the unbreakable bonds between them that would last forever.
「I want to correct what I said earlier, Suya— you’re still my beloved disciple. You know me well, learn from me, oppose me, won’t follow me blindly and walk your own path. I sincerely respect that side of you—」
The youth stared right at her and opened his heart to her. After hearing all that, her lips on her hung head quivered a little.
「... Who will...」
「———」
「... Who will accept that—!」
Suya shook off his hands like a kid throwing a tantrum. Ikuta smiled awkwardly, and let her go wild.
「— Uwah—」
The next moment, Suya’s body collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. She fainted without feeling any pain. A vermillion haired general stood silently behind her, with his right hand grabbing her neck at just the right spot.
「... Sorry about that, Honorary Field Marshal Igsem.」
「I have decided to move according to your wishes.」
The man said with an unwavering voice, then turned to the youth and continued:
「However, I want you to promise me one thing— if you change your mind and want to live, do not hesitate to find me or anyone else for help.」
「... Yes, I will do that— Thank you, uncle Sol.」
Ikuta addressed him sincerely for the first time. When the man heard that— he showed a smile so faint that it could only be seen through a microscope, before reverting back to his stoic face.
「... Ughh...」
At the same time. Unable to contact Ikuta, Chamille’s anxiety started ballooning.
Her efficiency in her work fell below half of her usual self. Just suppressing her emotional outburst that would well up with a moment of lapse required extraordinary focus.

□──Your Majesty, the members of the □Knights Corp□ are seeking an audience.□
At this moment, Lucanti's voice came from outside. The Empress' shoulders shuddered, and after a pause, she asked with fake calm:□The reason for their visit?□
□They said it's not for official matters, and wished to discuss something in private.□
□... I understand, let them in.□
Chamille said after making her resolve. Matthew, Torway and Haro soon entered the room. Their serious faces made what they were thinking clear without needing to speak.
□We want to discuss the matter of rescuing Ikuta.□
Matthew skipped the formalities and got right into the heart of the matter. Chamille was about to stand and speak when Haro stopped her:
□Please wait, we know what Your Majesty will say, it's fine to keep it in your mind. Because we have already grasped the situation.□
□... Is that so?... I already made my resolve for you to get mad at me...□
□I have a mountain of things to say, but I don't have the time. You can't get mad at him or anything without dragging that fool here first. You feel the same way too right, Your Majesty?□
The pudgy youth said matter of factly. Chamille felt relieved that he wasn't overly concerned about her, and turned towards the reception area at a corner of the room.
□That's true... Have a seat, let's have a good, long chat.□
□... Defendant?.. Defendant Solork! Defendant Ikuta Solork!□
□── Hmm?□
The voice calling his name roused the youth out of his slumber. He could see dangerous gleams from all around him. After sensing that his hands were tied behind him to a hard chair, Ikuta finally remembered the situation he was in.
□── Oh, pardon me. I thought this will be a long session and dozed off.□
□Who will doze off in the middle of a court session!? We are trying you for your crimes, listen carefully with a serious attitude!□
□Yes□ I can continue if I have a cup of tea... Can I request for a short break?□
This was a serious suggestion, and not a taunt. However, the attendees couldn't tell the difference and curses came from all around him. Ikuta treated them like an alarm clock, and sighed heavily.
Ikuta was sent back to prison after the day's hearing was over. The moment he entered his cell, he collapsed face down onto his bed, and nursed his back that had turned sore from sitting so long in a hard chair. At this moment── he heard footsteps approaching.
□── It's you today, Patrenshina?□
Ikuta sat up on his bed and said. She walked up to the iron bars, and furrowed after hearing that.

□... No, why do you know it’s me? I didn’t even say a word.□
□Your expression and the way you walk are different. Want me to point out the key points?□
□... I will lose my confidence, so forget it. You really are a scary guy.□
Patrenshina pouted. She sat down right before the bars and glared at him angrily.
□Hey, come on out. If you die, Haro will cry. Aren’t you breaking your promise?□
□Even I can’t keep a promise of living forever□□
□Stupid, I’m telling you to not die before Haro does. You have to take responsibility for the people you saved.□
□... You’re right, I do have to take responsibility.□
The youth hung his head bitterly at her accusation. Patrenshina returned to her body, and Haro appeared with a calm smile in her stead.
□Good Afternoon, Ikuta-san── Actually, I laughed out loud when I heard you dozed off during the trial.□
□Ahh── no, it’s normal for me to fall asleep. I was expecting more, but the trial was more boring than I thought. The chair is hard, and they keep asking the same questions… Sigh, it’s only natural for there to be grounds for improvements, and I hope everyone can learn from Kioka in the future.□
□Fufufu… Ikuta-san is actually criticizing the contents of the trial while seated in the Defendant’s chair.□
□Should I listen carefully to their accusation, then claim that I’m reflecting on my actions, and speak about how tragic my life had been with a pained expression?□
□That’s hard for me to imagine── However, □we want you to do that from now on□.□
Haro said with a firm tone. Sensing the change in her tone, Ikuta turned serious too.
□Disregarding what will happen in the future, we need you to avoid the death penalty for now. That is what we have concluded.□
□... So everyone has met up to discuss things, huh. Yes, I think that is a rationale goal.□
□To lighten the sentencing as much as possible, Her Majesty and us will do what we can. But the troubling thing is, there is a devious liar wasting all our efforts.□
□Oh□ I wonder who might that be? He must be a crook.□
The youth pretend to be retarded, and Haro bit her lips.
□I won’t ask you to explain── but can you just stay quiet? That will make our connections and image manipulation easier.□
□I want to do that, but it’s difficult for the glib tongue Ikuta to shut up in such a place.□
□... The death penalty isn’t necessary to achieve your goals. For example, the frustration of the masses can be vented with your imprisonment. It

might be sly, but if we release reports that you are being interrogated every day and turned frail—」
「While I'm actually living a carefree live in prison?」
「That's right. If you're fine with it, I can be your neighbour.」
Haro might look like she was joking, but she was serious. The youth smiled happily.
「If I can read and sleep as I wish, that's not a bad life. And it will be even better if I can chat with you— however, I have to decline.」
Ikuta refused with a firm tone. Haro bit her lower lips.
「... Is there a flaw in this plan?」
「Just one— This plan can't protect Chamille.」
The unexpected issue made Haro dumbstruck. Ikuta sigh with self mockery, then continued:
「It's a shame, but the plan I'm trying to execute now isn't my first choice. I considered a better option, and if possible, I want to accomplish it without anyone dying. However— I can't do it. I can't fulfil the precondition.」
「... The precondition?」
「Chamille forgiving herself.」
As expected, the name of the blond girl popped up here. The youth showed a lonely smile at the confused Haro.
「For the past few years, that has been my goal. You should know that.」
「... Of course I know. However, I can't accept that fully. Why must Ikuta-san die if Her Majesty doesn't forgive herself?」
「It's a little different. If I don't die, that child will die. She will think about dying, have a reason to die, and can't find a reason to live. When these three conditions are met, humans will inevitably seek death… Chamille already had two of these conditions in mind for a long time. She is still living because of that last point— There is a reason why she must live. To take responsibility as an Imperial for the nation's corruption.」
「.....」
「However— if I live on, she will lose that reason. Because Chamille thinks that the country will be fine if she hands things over to me. In her original plan where she declared defeat, she will get executed as a traitor, and I will take over the country… You understand, right? The Parliament and Judicial court are set up by her to govern the nation without an Empress. These are all preparations for the nation after she dies. In other words— I'm the reason why she is permitting her own death, so I have to eliminate myself. In order for that child to live on, my existence will get in the way.」
Ikuta said firmly, and Haro held her breath— she realized that too. Since the first time she met Chamille, that girl had a deeply rooted sense of self loath and self destruction.
As a medic, Haro knew that 「craving for death」 was the most serious illness in the world. It was incredibly difficult to make a suicidal person live on. The underlying issues were unique for each individual, and there wasn't any miracle drug to cure it.

□... We will convince Her Majesty, and won't let her kill herself. So—□
□I'm the one closest to her, and couldn't do it after several years. I'm sorry for saying this, but I don't think all of you working together will change things… Of course, I won't say that it's impossible. After five years, ten years, or even longer, she will get over this mental issue one day. But as you know, it's all over if she dies before that… If a person has the will, they can die just by biting their own tongue, you can't stop them no matter how carefully you keep watch over them. Just take your eyes off her slightly, and she will die.□
Haro clenched her fists. He was right— that was the most fearsome thing about suicide. As long as they harbour a craving for death, the war with that urge would continue daily, and they would need to win that battle each time to survive. In contrast, □death□ just needs to win once. For example, even if □live□ has a 99.9% advantage, simple statistics mean that person would die within a thousand days.
□Letting Chamille live on is the top priority for me. So I won't hesitate in using this method… However, I'm vexed about this. Actually, I want that child to have a reason to live, instead of a reason to not die. In the times I spent with her, I have been searching for that reason… However, I couldn't find it. I couldn't get any result, and the time limit is up.□
His powerlessness made Ikuta clench his teeth. Haro didn't know what to say about Ikuta's troubles— but at this unexpected timing, another person spoke on her behalf:
□So that's what your bullshit is about? Chamille, Chamille and more Chamille?□
Ikuta looked up, surprised by the timing of this personality switch.
□...Patrenshina?□
□I'm fine, but look at Haro— Hey, who is the person before you? Don't use the life of that child to force others to accept your demands. Haro's feelings matter too— she wants you to live no matter what. You should understand, right? How a person can ignore everything for someone important?□
The agitated Patrenshina said all that for Haro's sake, and Ikuta's face frowned from regret. He was only focused on Chamille, and ignored the visitor trying to save him, and that was hopelessly foolish and cruel.
□... I will never neglect you.□
He knew that was sophistry, but what Ikuta said was his true unwavering feelings. Patrenshina's poker face glaring at the youth switched to Haro's calm expression.
□... Sorry. Letting that child say my true feelings is a bad habit of mine.□
□That's not true… At least, she made me say my true feelings.□
Ikuta shook his head and said. With the troubled youth before her, Haro felt a strong sense of concern in her heart— she took a deep breath to calm herself, then slowly stood up.
□I know I can't convince you here… However, we won't give up till the end.□

「... Yes, I know you will say that.」
「Right, so don't make yourself decide things alone.」
With that, Haro stuck her arms through the iron bars── Ikuta embraced her quietly in response. Both of them were saved by each other's warmth in the past.
「This is definitely not a goodbye hug.」
Haro said as if she was making a wish. Ikuta didn't say anything, and just held her tighter.

「…Huff」, Puff「…」
On the road in the capital dyed red by the setting sun. Vackie and Yorga were running to the mansion of the next authoritative figure.
「Hey Vackie, you are working too hard. You haven't slept for days, right?」
「I want to sleep, but I can't let Ikuta-nii die either.」
The white-coat girl answered Yorga's concern with ragged breath. They were working night and day to save Ikuta from the judicial court.
「If we can avoid a death sentence, we can buy more time. We are setting everything else aside just for this… but it's tough. If Ikuta-nii pushed himself hard towards a death sentence, it would be very difficult. Even if we connect with the attendees of the trial before hand, we might not make it ahead of time.」
「… The biggest problem is that we can't participate in the trial. To think being close to Her Majesty will work against us in such a way.」
They were officials working in the palace, and weren't permitted to participate in the judicial court convened by ordinary citizens. They had no way of directly influencing the result of the judgement, and could only go around to convince the people who could.
As her breathing got more ragged, Vackie's running speed got slower. She reached her limit a while later and stopped.
「… Sorry Yorga, give me a piggyback. I will sleep a while before we reach the next place.」
「It is about time you said that, get on.」
Yorga got in front of her and squatted down with his back towards her. The white coat girl immediately dozed off after leaning onto his back.
「── It seems everyone has been fooled by what the Defendant said.」
Ikuta's eleventh trial suddenly went in a different direction. A man stood up, and expressed an opinion that differed from what the attendees thought.
「Please cool your heads. If everything he said is true, then there are too many contradictions. Think about it. A person who has saved the Empire out of many dire situations wouldn't do something so self destructive on the spur of the moment.」
Another lady raised her hand after that, and said something that affirmed his statement.
「I concur. And we shouldn't forget about his accomplishment in leading the Imperial army to victory. It's the same for the final battle, without the leadership of the Defendant, the Kioka army would already have invaded the capital.」
They raised their hands one after another to support the first speaker. *Have they finally made the arrangements?*
Ikuta thought as he listened from the center of the hall. To stop the youth from getting the death sentence, his colleagues had colluded with the

participants in an attempt to change the trend of the trial. However— Ikuta actively nipped that possibility in the bud.
「Oh, you found out. That's right— I actually have my reasons, something that will move anyone to tears. And I'm sure everyone here will shed a tear too.」
Ikuta interrupted the movement that was gaining momentum. He intentionally said it that way, which made those attempting to save him furrow their brows in confusion.
「... So, before I publish that, can you wait? I'm still thinking up the final scene. What should one say when bidding farewell to their parents that will move people the most? It's hard to decide.」
The youth slapped the hand offered to him, which made them sighed. Despite Yorga and the other's effort to send his colluded people into the trial— as long as Ikuta continues to show this attitude like a commentary host, there wouldn't be much chance to get people on his side.
That night, Ikuta spent his time in his cell just like last time. And he predicted who his visitor would be.
「— You came, partner.」
Ikuta was lying in bed and flipping a thick bed as he answered the jade-eyed youth who walked up to the iron bars. Torway immediately smiled awkwardly.
「I heard from Haro-san… You look well, Ik-kun.」
「The trial is entering the last phrase. I want to reduce the number of books I haven't read, and is very busy everyday.」
Ikuta said as he flipped the pages. Torway sat down before the cell as he looked at Ikuta, then said:
「I have many things to say… But before that, I have good news.」
「Oh」 you finally had your first time? Who's the lucky person?」
「N-Not yet. It's something better… Sushuraf-nii has regained conscious.」
「—— Is that true?」
Ikuta stopped flipping the pages and sat up on his bed. Torway nodded with a smile.
「... That's great. I don't want to see Sariha bro's face if his brother died.」
「He will need to rest, but luckily, he can make a full recovery, and return to military service after he gets well… I'm really relieved. Given how serious his injuries were, I thought even the tough Sushuraf-nii won't make it.」
Torway sighed with relief, then turned to Ikuta again.
「There's another thing that will make you even happier.」
「... Oh」? It's not like you to speak in such a roundabout fashion.」
「Fufu, sorry. I will tell you then— We have confirmed that Brigadier General Sazarf and Lieutenant Colonel Melza are alive in a prison camp in Kioka. He didn't have any serious injuries.」
He dropped the book he was reading. Ikuta asked with a trembling voice:
「... That person is still alive...?」

He prohibited himself from holding any expectations. Because the intel they could get in war was too limited. The youth already steeled his heart to accept any death reports. However— there would be occasional strokes of luck. Ikuta got up from bed, but lost his balance and sat back down again.
「... Haha, my knees turned weak. This is the best news I have gotten in recent years...」
The youth said with a strong sense of relief in his heart. Torway looked at him with a smile and added:
「It would still take a while before he returns through a prisoner exchange. But they will be back. If we wait, we will meet again.」
「Yes… I'm counting on you to pass him a message. Tell him that I will never forget that time when he ignored orders.」
Ikuta started joking as usual. But Torway shook his head with a serious face.
「Tell that to him yourself, Ik-kun.」
「.....」
「... Live. No one in this country wants you to die. Especially the people around me, we all feel sad that you are not willing to live on. We will work out a way around Empress Chamille's problem. If we put our heads together, we will find a better way. Just like how we always do...」
The jade-eyed youth said with clenched fists. Ikuta narrowed his eyes. His deep belief in the Knights Corp had not changed at all.
「... Live, Ik-kun. I don't want, I really don't want to see the two people I admire the most to depart before me...!」
Torway hung his head with his hands on the bars. Ikuta walked towards him as if to console him—
「— Uwah?」
Torway was caught off guard by a flick to the forehead. The person who mercilessly struck the teary eyed Torway snorted.
「... You still look handsome even after crying so much? Tch~ how infuriating.」
Ikuta muttered unreasonably, then straightened his back and stared right at Torway.
「Let your feelings of admiration graduate right here… Yatori and I are soldiers of the past. In the future, you will need to be aware of other's admiration towards you. It's unbecoming for a commander of an army like you to be so humble, you know?」
「—Ughh...」
「A soldier that Yatori acknowledges, and a partner that I acknowledge— That's you, Torway Remeon. I think that's the best source of confidence, or is your evaluation of us actually not that high?」
「— That's impossible!」
When Torway shouted in denial, Ikuta smiled wryly. Torway didn't even react so intensely when others berated him.

「Then puffed your chest out and say 「leave the rest to me, you can die in peace」. Then I can let a load off my shoulder.」
He even suggested to Torway to sprout some arrogant lines. Torway's eyes wavered sadly.
「... I can't do it, Ik-kun. The pain of losing my friend, losing my partner, is similar to the guilt I feel when I shoot a living being── No matter how confident I am, I can't change that part of myself.」
The youth said as he looked at his right hand that had pulled a gun trigger countless times. The lives he had taken, and the lives he would take in the future. Torway Remeon faced all that head on.
「... That's right, and staying true to your nature is the best thing about you.」
Ikuta said gently and patted his shoulder. As someone who would be leaving first, Ikuta encouraged him not to be frantic or push himself too hard.
「── Don't forget that. My partner is a timid Mr Nice Guy, and a pretty boy so cool that makes me mad. And the very best sniper that no one ever was.」
This is like a scene from the past
, the jade-eyed youth thought. Ikuta Solork was only exceptionally strict with him, and the times they spent together was always fun. Torway Remeon would always feel proud that he served as his partner on the battlefield.
「── The attendees' impression of him is worsening! Isn't there anything we can do...!」
When he learned of the trial's progress, General Remeon's depressed voice echoed in the conference room. The members of the 「Knights Corp」, Suya, him and many officers who felt the same way were figuring out a way to rescue Ikuta.
「... How about declaring martial law? We will use the excuse of the nation being unstable after the war ended, and cut the trial short indefinitely.」
A young officer suggested a desperate idea. His colleague opposite him frowned.
「Suppressing the nation in the name of maintaining order? ...That's the worst excuse.」
「Then what do you suggest!? That we sit here and watch him get executed?」
The frustration of not finding an answer made the officers stand up and start a heated argument. Unable to let this go, General Shiba mediated:
「Calm down and stop fighting. And don't forget── no matter how anxious you are, don't do something out of line for a soldier. That's our base line.」
He warned his hot headed subordinates not to be reckless. Seeing them sit down in self reflection, He muttered in a quiet voice only the officer beside him could hear.
「Only if he doesn't wish for it... Isn't that right, Honorary Field Marshal Igsem?」

The vermillion-haired general answered with silence. If Ikuta says 「save me」— They wouldn't hesitate to hand back their commission in the army and take immediate action… But at the same time, they understand that moment would never come.
On a night five days after Torway's visit. Footsteps filled with the most motivation and spirit so far echoed in the prison, and Ikuta knew who it was just from that.
「... Oh, it's finally your turn? My dear Matthew.」
The slightly plump youth stood before the cell holding a large parcel with his legs apart. Ikuta walked over and turned his cheek towards Matthew. Matthew could touch him if he reached his arms through the bars.
「———」
「... Hmm? Aren't you going to punch me?」
Ikuta looked at the other person's fist and, to his surprise, didn't swing at him. After thinking silently for a moment, Matthew snorted.
「I was planning to do that, but held myself back… Punching you now will just make you feel better.」
His words implied something worse than a simple beating. When he heard that, Ikuta's face started twitching for the first time since Suya got mad.
「... That's a scary aura. This must the angriest you have been, Matthew ..」
「Of course, compared to this, even that thing about Haro seems trivial. You kept us in the dark and betrayed us without talking about it— and is now attempting to keep at it to the end.」
Matthew glared as he listed out Ikuta's crimes, then continued in a low growl:
「Don't think I will be as gentle as Torway or Haro… I never thought about convincing you, I will force you to live with my own strength, that's all.」
「If I get in a scuffle with you right now, I will definitely lose… But I think it will be meaningless to drag me out of my cell though?」
「I'm not thinking convincing you through brute strength— this is how we will compete.」
Matthew put down his parcel and opened it. Inside was a heavy chess set and pieces. It wasn't just great in quality, it's owner cherished it deeply too as it had a glister unique in chess pieces.
「... Chess...」
「I don't know how many times I lost to you, and you probably weren't even serious… But that ends now.」
Matthew declared and sat down slowly before the chess board. He stared at the stiff Ikuta with an imposing sitting posture.
「Let's make this a life and death match, Ikuta. If you win, you can die as you wish. If I win, you will live on as I say. I will resolve any issues that might come up.」
He declared confidently, and Ikuta asked in surprise:
「H-How will you do that, specifically?」

「I haven’t thought about it, but will do so soon. So you even need to ask? Chess is a match in intellect, and I will defeat you. Since I’m smarter than you, I will come up with ideas that you will never dream of.」
Matthew announced boldly, then set the pieces on his side of the board. Seeing how confident Matthew was, Ikuta sat opposite him in resignation.
「… How troubling. Right now… You are the coolest person in the world.」
「Being cool doesn’t matter, I just need to be better than you── Let’s see who will make the first move.」
Urged by Matthew, Ikuta took a chess piece from either side of the board, then clutched one in each hand. The pudgy youth pointed at the right hand without hesitation, and it was a Wind gunner from Matthew’s side of the board.
「I will make the first move, Ikuta. If you don’t want to lose, then don’t hold back.」
「Of course, Matthew. Holding back here will be no different from suicide.」
Ikuta took on his challenge and promised to go all out. Both of them focused on the chess board. And so── the first serious match between the two youths started for the first time.
「」
At the same time, in the Kioka Republic Capital Norandot. In the abode of the Scientists built in its outskirts── Anarai Khan’s laboratory.
「…Professor, what is Ikuta doing right now?」
Bajin said as he looked into a microscope. Anarai who was dissecting the leaves of a meaty plant carefully moved his surgical knife as he answered:
「Who knows, but── he must be spending his time meaningfully. Because he cherishes his friends.」
He said with firm conviction. His disciple was walking his own path far away from him, and his last conversation with that youth was still fresh on Anarai’s mind.
「Ikuta said he has many comrades in the Empire. That’s why, no matter what path he takes, he will never walk alone. Many people will be there for him. And of course, that includes us. Anyone in the world will call this a fortunate situation, right?」
After saying that in a firm tone, Anarai continued conducting scientific research. He didn’t change after that last farewell── He sincerely wished for the Sprites to light the way with love for Ikuta Solork.
「」
Time had lost meaning, and they entered a trance of intense concentration. When they realized it, the match had gone on for two days and two nights.
「……」
「────」
There wasn’t any time limit set for this match. Both of them accepted this condition and proceeded with this untimed match. Every move they made grinded their very souls, and they made move after move. The match

remained even despite the ever changing board, as they traded advantages at a blistering pace.
"—Ughh—"
And so, the chess match moved towards its endgame— The delicate balance that looked as if it would last forever, finally crumbled.
"... Ughh..."
The pieces protecting Matthew's king kept changing formation to defend against the onslaught of attacks, and showed a hair thin gap. It couldn't be seen at a glance. There was a checkmate in tens of moves by using four different pieces consecutively.
Matthew realized that a step later. No— it was a miracle he noticed just a step late. This was a unique style not recorded in any chess books, something unique to Ikuta Solork. When the vermillion-haired girl was still alive, he dreamt up this secret move to use against her one day.
"..... I have nothing....."
Facing the chess moves that were the crystallization of pure intellect, Matthew Tetzirich thought for a long time and realized his king couldn't escape— however, he refused to concede. He bet on the possibility that his opponent would miss that checkmate and struggled til the end. And finally, he squeezed out these words, which reflected his heart.
"... I thought..."
While his opponent was hanging his head, Ikuta muttered with his palm on his forehead. After a long pause, he said with an exhausted voice.
"... I thought my head was going to explode, really. Every move is incredibly sharp, and the harshness in reading ahead makes me forget to breathe, and your defense is suffocating… This match with you is really fun. Haha— look, I'm still shaking. To think you gave me the most amazing game in my life at the very end..."
Ikuta continued, his pitch changed because of his emotions. He then thought— how many times did he fall into a pinch, and how many reversals happened? He thought about how accurately the pudgy youth handled all that.
"This is my last match. However— you will become stronger. Maybe even stronger than Yatori or me… Ah, it's frustrating that I won't get to witness that..."
This new regret gripped Ikuta's chest. At this moment— Matthew who was seated opposite him said with a hoarse voice while glaring at the chess board:
"...Quitting after you're ahead…!? …You! …Til the end, you...!"
Tears fell onto the chessboard along with his sniffling. Ikuta thought about the deep emotions invested in this match, and how hard Matthew had studied. Ikuta trembled with gratefulness because of Matthew's extraordinary efforts, and could feel how fortunate he was.
"... That's right, I'm quitting while I'm ahead. I might not win again if we have a rematch. However— before I quit, there's something I want to say."

Ikuta reached his arms out through the bars. He leaned towards Matthew’s bowed head, their foreheads almost touching. He could hear Matthew’s breathing as Matthew’s tears pooled on the chess board.
「Thank you, my dear Matthew── My time with you will always be an honour to me.」
Ikuta offered his deepest thanks with that… He tried to save Ikuta until the end, and never gave up on competing against Ikuta. He wanted to boast to the world that he had such a great friend.
After a long series of hearings, the long trial finally came to an end.
「... We have spent 21 days on the Defendant’s trial. There is nothing left unsaid, and have deliberated sufficiently.」
The judge announced with a stern voice. Only on this day, all the attendees waited quietly for him to continue.
「Listen carefully, Defendant Ikuta Solork. I will now read out your verdict.」
This was the only time the dark-haired youth wasn’t tied onto a chair, and was standing in the center of the hall. The judge who had warned and reminded him numerous time announced:
「The Defendant’s crimes are vicious and despicable. Scheming against the Empress makes his sins even graver. Losing his parents at a young age might be grounds for sympathy, but that can’t mitigate his crimes significantly──」
「.....」
「── Committing treason while appointed to the post of Field Marshal has negatively affected the nation by an immeasurable amount. His heinous crimes had resulted in a loss that reached an astronomical number, and is effectively impossible to reparate. Hence, the only way for the Defendant to pay for his crimes is to cleanse his body and soul through the heaviest punishment possible.」
Ikuta roughly translated this exaggerated statement in his heart. In short── you greatly wronged society, and can’t pay for your crimes, so at the very least, you should accept this punishment and contribute to society by being an example. *I see, very adequate,*
he smiled awkwardly.
「For your above crimes──」
The judge paused here. Everyone could tell that he would conclude things with his next words.
「I hereby sentence Defendant Ikuta Solork to death by public decapitation.」
There was nothing surprising about his verdict, it was an adequate and rational decision.
「The verdict has been given. However, before we end the trial, Defendant Ikuta Solork is permitted to make his last statement. You can voice any dissatisfaction about the hearing or anything else, you may speak freely.」
The judge urged him according to the procedures. Ikuta surveyed the crowd and then──
「I will do that then──「Never forget this betrayal」.」

He told the crowd firmly. The participants rubbed their eyes as the youth made his final statement with a serious voice he had not shown in the trial so far:

「A hero that can be trusted unconditionally without any limits── such a person has never existed in all time and space. Be it an Emperor or anyone else, there is a limit to what one person can do── and when that limit is surpassed, that person will be forced to decide between tossing aside the burden or breaking the load. Those who toss aside the burden are traitors, and those who break the load are madmen. Both scenarios will damage the country seriously. If the burden isn't distributed adequately, that will just be digging your own grave, I hope everyone can keep that in mind.」

Ikuta demanded in a stoic voice. Countless mistakes had already been made in the Empire, and they lost too many things. At the very least, they should learn from those mistakes.

「You can respect a person as a leader, but you must always suspect him too. You have to keep questioning his will, and whether his action really meets your expectations. If you neglect your supervision, then people like me will appear. Pretending to be a hero and revered by the masses, while exploiting my status to enrich myself. People like me will definitely show up. Don't let such people take on a leadership role, and if they do, impeach them immediately, that's your obligation. An important responsibility that will directly affect your happiness.」

Surprisingly, the place didn't turn rowdy. The participants looked at Ikuta and waited for him to go on. They all realized by instinct that they were hearing his true thoughts for the first time.

「I'm happy that everyone here felt outraged by my actions. Because if no one feels that way, that means the country is beyond hope… However, that didn't happen. The road here might be windy, but the Parliament and Judicial court showed a clear will to do better. This might be a light that will fade at any moment, but you allowed me to have hope. I hope you can let me imagine a day when this country won't ever rely on heroes again.」

Ikuta suddenly smiled, then looked at the attendees who went through this long trial alongside him.

「Sorry about the many reckless actions── Oh right, let me give some final feedback. I think the Defendant should have a better chair. A time limit should be set for each hearing to avoid the trial turning into vicious verbal attacks against the exhausted Defendant. You can take reference from Kioka's Parliament, since they have been perfecting this system for the past century.」

He pointed out flaws and offered advice as he usually does. Some of the attendees smiled awkwardly, then quietly noted Ikuta's issues in their mind. Thinking back, there was room for improvements for the trial.

「I have said quite a bit, so I will stop here. Your Honour, please make the concluding statement.」

The youth returned the floor back to the judge after saying his piece. The judge stared at him and said:
「... Ikuta Solork, you...」
He stopped himself mid-sentence── there was no point in saying anything now. The sentence must be carried out, and both the attendees and the Defendant accepted that. They were an organization that was still green, but they completed the hearing in their own way. And so, they had to accept this conclusion.
「... No, nothing. The sentencing has been given, and we have completed the trial. The first judicial court is now adjourned── all rise, and bow.」
After the Judge said that, the attendees stood up and bowed. *Thank you for your hard work*
── Ikuta said in his heart as he looked at them.
That night, when the youth was sent back to prison, a girl broke off the restraints of her martial officers, and ran down the corridor towards where he was.
「... Hah, hah, hah, hah...!」
She reached the bars and stared at that person. The books he had read were stacked high on his bed, while Ikuta Solork was sitting on the floor waiting for her.
「──── Hi, long time no see, Chamille, did you run all the way from the palace? You are panting really hard, drink some water first.」
The youth picked up a water flask and poured a cup for her. The Empress wanted to ignore him and speak, but couldn't say anything because of her ragged breathing. She had no choice but to grab the cup and drink it all.
「──── Hah... hah..... hah..... hah.....」
She took quite a while to calm her breathing as Ikuta waited quietly. When she was ready, Chamille took a deep breath.
「── You big dummy□□□!」
She shouted loud enough for the entire prison to hear. After the echoes faded away, Ikuta looked at her, impressed:
「... My ears are ringing. You are amazing, Chamille. That's a really loud yell.」
「Ughh! Y-You are saying such things again...! Do you really understand! Understand what you have done, and what is to come...!」
「Of course── In the morning three days later, my death sentence will be carried out before the Cathedral in the Imperial Capital Banhataal. It will be death by guillotine as ordered by the judicial court. I will spend my time leisurely in prison before my execution. I can get whatever I need here, it's really comfortable.」
The youth said with a smile. With the girl gritting her teeth before him, he picked up his partner from his bed.
「Since the trial is over, they finally returned Kusu to me. I feel uneasy without it by my side. Because of the constant calls, it's communication

function has been switched off. That goes for your call too, sorry that I can’t take your call.
Ikuta apologized. Chamille breathed slowly to calm her nerves, then said with a suppressed voice:
.. Solork, it’s not too late, leave this place and run.
Ehh?
The sentencing by the judicial court can’t be overturned. But there is still a way to escape the death sentence. Any reason will do── for example, declaring that you died from illness in prison. You can just assume a different name and live somewhere else. I can easily make such arrangements. So...!
The girl urged him to break out of prison. For an instant, the youth showed a lonely smile.
Many soldiers died during the final battle with Kioka. They fought under my command and believed we would triumph. So I can’t betray them by faking my death, Chamille.
That’s not your sin! You took that sin from me! Why── Why didn’t you let me declare defeat? That was my goal! I should be tried by the judicial court for treason! You took that away! You took everything, everything I built up is gone because of you...!
The girl yelled with all sorts of emotions. Ikuta nodded.
That’s right, I took everything… Because you haven’t forgiven yourself yet.
That’s the only way I can atone! To atone for the sins of the Eternal Sprite Tree bloodline, I need to destroy the Imperial family beyond reprieve, and execute me, the last heir to the bloodline! Only then can I be burned by the flames of hell as I wished! I can atone for these sins and end my wretched life...!
The girl stated her goal with a crazed tone. Ikuta looked at her true self which he had peeked at numerous times.
Regarding the issue of sin, your argument and mine have always run parallel to each other. I insist it doesn't exist, while you claim it does, and refuse to back down… I can understand if you say someone demands for you to atone for your sins. But no one did. Not one person in the Empire will find happiness because you offered up your life. Then── isn’t that sin just a delusion in your mind?
No, that’s not true, Solork! What would the dead buried by history say!? The people who couldn’t even complain, the lives trampled by my forebears, what would they say!? They can’t even speak of their grudge! However, the sins of the abusers can be clearly seen! The Eternal Sprite Tree’s evil won’t vanish with the passage of time! The sin will follow the bloodline forever! It is part of my sullied flesh and blood, and is still lingering here...!
I licked your blood when we first met! According to your theory, then I’m sullied too! But I’m still alive and kicking without falling ill, that’s too strange!

Ikuta’s voice turned agitated because of her intensity. Sensing the direction their conversation was going, Chamille shook her head firmly.
「No… No, Solork. I’m not trying to argue with you, or refute your thinking. I just── I just don’t want you to die. That’s all, nothing else. I want you to live...!」
「I have the exact same thinking as you, which led me here… how complicated. You want to die, and want me to live. In order to make you live, I have to die. We both share the same wish for the other to live, but death should come our way with a sharp blade.」
The youth paused after saying that with a heavy tone. He thought for a moment, then changed his approach.
「Let’s make an assumption── assuming there is a future where neither you nor me will die. That’s what I want to do in recent years. Since you don’t want me to die no matter what── then Chamille, will you agree to that plan?」
The girl’s shoulders shuddered, and Ikuta understood. He knew she would never accept such a proposal and continued:
「Let’s copy your earlier proposal, and both of us fake our deaths and leave this place. We will change our names, our home, and our way of life. Far away in a distant nation, how about being a farmer in a corner of Kioka? A carefree life suits me just fine, and I think it fits you better than life in the palace. And of course, living in the boondocks has its own hardships and troubles too. But at least, there’s nothing that will compel our demise.」
Chamille hung her head and shivered wordlessly. She would never agree to the youth’s proposal, but couldn’t reject him out loud either. His kindness made her happy, but she couldn’t respond since she sincerely wanted to kill herself. Ikuta could see her struggles clearly.
「If things can be solved by me staying by your side, then we can make it work… However, it’s not that easy. You adamantly refuse a happy future, which includes my existence. It’s not that you can’t find a path towards happiness, you are just stopping yourself from getting happiness.」
「……」
「You should know that this is a curse cast on you by Ario Kyakushii when you were young. It’s something he implanted in you with twisted malice. Who will benefit if you lose your life because you are bound by that thing? Who will be happy about it? Even Ario Kyakushii won’t want it── the idea he gave you was a set up for the invasion of the Empire. And now, it’s a move that’s already moot. That idea in your mind is just the remains of a curse that lost its purpose.」
He knew it was cruel to put it that way, but Ikuta still said it out loud. He reached for the bars between the girl and him, touching the square frames.
「Listen, Chamille, you need to draw a line. The twisted idea implanted by others, and your own values. If you don’t divide them clearly, you won’t see the true nature of yourself as a human. This means that you haven’t seen the shape of your soul yet.」

「——— The shape, of my soul…?」
「This is my real final challenge. To dig out the tumour compelling to seek death, and cutting it out from your soul. The process will be painful, and you will bleed out blood you can't see. But you definitely need this treatment. In this crucial moment with my execution looming, this is the best time to clearly see the silhouette of your soul.」
Ikuta declared and looked right into her eyes. Chamille felt something was about to happen and grew wary on reflex.
「First question. Don't think and answer directly── do you like or hate humans?」
He asked something out of left field. It was difficult to decipher the youth's intent, but he conveyed his firm resolve clearly. Chamille answered:
「── Like. I always like the lives of people, and the scenery of people interacting with each other.」
「I know that… The sandbox is interesting, I want to play that again.」
The youth smiled as he thought as he reminisced about the past. Chamilled remembered the numerous attempts she made during her time with him, and felt a dull pain in her chest.
「Second question── There is a village where everyone is lazy and listless. What will you do to them?」
This question took a different direction from the previous one. The girl answered immediately:
「── It's fine if they are happy. But if that is not so, I want to point them in the direction where they can achieve happiness. And then… no.」
She stopped midway, but the youth refused to let her do so.
「Wait, don't stop. What did you want to say? Don't hold back, say it properly.」
His demand made Chamille hold her breath. After some hesitation, the girl answered with her head low:
「… If possible, I want to be happy by building a relationship with them… I think it's a wilful wish, and quite hesitant to say it.」
「I see. However── the villagers don't think you are wilful, and it won't cause any problems. You are not the one to judge if your actions are wilful, shouldn't they be the one to do so?」
He pointed out the prudence stuck in her mind. But Ikuta moved on after mentioning that:
「Third question── A child has violent parents. The villagers who got beaten by these parents demand the child to atone for that crime. Is the child guilty? Yes or no?」
She didn't answer immediately this time. Chamille's thought with a serious face, then said bitterly:
「..... I can't answer that. Where do we draw the line for crimes? That is rooted in common ethics. As an outsider, I can't comment on it lightly.」
「I see. What if you are the head of that village? What will be your judgement?」

「... If I'm in that position, I won't persecute that child. I will try to eliminate crime by association as much as possible, and nurture an ethics view that respects the individuality of a person... If I'm allowed to redefine the concept of crime... I want to define it as something resulting from one's own judgement and action, and not something shackled to you by the gods or from your birth.」
Chamille fluently stated his ideal as a leader. Ikuta said with a cheerful smile:
「That's the answer, the biggest clue that divides your soul from the tumour── the primitive crime by association between parent and child, and the crime by association of the Imperial family. The two are identical in structure. However── you refuse to acknowledge the former, but think the latter is applicable to you.」
「.....!」
「Do you know where that contradiction comes from? ──You got the sequence wrong. The crime by association of the Imperial family── you didn't take on that sin because you think that theory is correct. It's the opposite── you want to shoulder that sin, that's why you accepted the illogical rationale about the Imperial bloodline. An unreasonable punishment only applicable to yourself, that's your twisted view... In contrast, you won't let children you don't know shoulder their parent's sins. Because that's your original sense of values.」
Chamille's heart thumped── he was right. The same logic should apply to similar examples, but she was guilty while the child was innocent, a clear contradiction. This meant that she was seeing her own crimes through twisted lenses?
「You used the Imperial bloodline as the basis of your self loath. Not because of the crimes committed by the Imperial family, but your own emotions of self hatred. But── think about it. Is that really an idea you had from the start?」
Ikuta questioned that point firmly. Chamille's vision was swirling── Maybe that did happen. When she was still little, there was a time when she didn't hate herself. So, what changed that? Who suggested this to her?
「── Ah── Ah──」
「Remember, Chamille! Realize that is a curse! Your thinking is being guided to make you hate yourself! Remove the self loath that had been imprinted into you, and what is left is the real you that you should cherish!」
Memories buried deep in her heart surfaced. The image of that man saying she was sad with a smile, and his claim that her bloodline was corrupted became vivid. She even remembered how lonely she felt when she accepted that point. That's right. Her extreme self loath stemmed from deep within her heart. It was an ominous thorny vine that grew from the seed planted by that man.
「── B-But, I──」

Why couldn’t she reject that seed? Because she was young and blindly believed the other party? ―That might be part of the reason. However, that wasn’t all. Her young self knew that the seed would grow into a thorny vine one day and trap herself. She knew, but her young self still nurtured that seed, because―

「― I had never been loved before.」

She stated the emptiness she felt in the beginning. As the youth watched her with a sad face, the girl recalled her past self. That’s right― That was the biggest reason why she accepted that 「seed」. That day, she couldn’t bear the barren soil in her heart, the field in her soul without a single seedling.

「After I was sent to Kioka, no one loved me. My father hated my existence, and wanted to strangle me. My mother never breastfed me. Even my nanny kept her interaction with me to the minimum to avoid being caught up in an assassination. There wasn’t any love in that place― Even if I try to love myself, I don’t understand what love is.」

「..... I see...」

「In my time in Kioka, Ario Kyakushii taught me to hate myself to replace love. I learned to hate myself as a replacement for not knowing love. I hated and hated, but my soul wasn’t satisfied. ― but I reached a strange conclusion. I accepted that 「my life is so painful because my existence is evil」. That’s why― I think I need to be cleansed. I believe that I must make up for the inherent evil brought about by my body. Shortly later, I was certain that the Imperial bloodline was the true face of evil― I realized that my goal in life is to destroy the Eternal Sprite Tree Empire.」

Chamille confessed with a calm voice― a girl who wasn’t loved, created a religion of self loath in her mind as a replacement. A cult that seeks redemption through self destruction. However― even such a thing could fill her heart. Even her self loath was better than the emptiness.

「My life started from this self hatred. But, if you say this is a curse, and I need to remove all that to see the real me― then isn’t just hollowness left? If I lose my self loath, I will have nothing. I won’t have a reason to go anywhere, or the drive to achieve anything. Once I lose my self hatred, then a flawed person like me won’t have anything―」

Escaping from that emptiness by filling her soul with self hatred. The girl faced this fact again― she had never been loved. Even her feelings of treating herself as the source of all evil was just deceiving herself from the emptiness from not being loved. However― once she realized this, where should she go? She couldn’t even set self destruction as her goal, what could she lean on now?

Two arms gently embraced the back of the panicking girl. The youth knew― she had a period of emptiness that was more painful than self loath. So much that she thought of the self loath as her redemption.

「... That’s not true, Chamille.」

Ikuta said that after understanding all that. Chamille slowly turned her hollow eyes towards the youth.
「.. Solork...?」
「Didn't you say you like people? That you like the life created by the interaction between people? Someone who has nothing won't say that. You do have something. The real you having many dazzling hopes.」
「――――」
「You said that too── You want to guide the lazy villagers towards happiness. You want a sense of fulfillment through your relationship with them.
I don't know other people with such a beautiful wish. Most people will be more selfish and seek personal gain. They won't even think their own gains are linked to the gains of others. But── you have known this in your heart since the beginning. Bringing happiness to others will in turn make you happy yourself, and your pure mind is certain about this cycle of happiness── don't you realize how amazing that is? I understand. You are born with a beautiful heart, Chamille.」
The youth told the girl, and put more strength into his arms embracing her. He was certain that he was holding something more precious than any gems.
「Do you still remember? When Vackie first came to the palace, she asked you this question── do you want to save the people? Or punish them? And you answered without hesitation that you want to save them. At that moment, I saw the beauty in your nature. Because── it's hard for me to think so. No matter how hard I try, I can't wish for that so purely.」
Ikuta said as he backed away with his mind set── the girl shouldn't be the only one baring her soul.
「I had not told you yet. Actually── I'm staying here partly because I want to. It's the opposite of your wish for the Empire's destruction… I have finally accepted that I wish to be here.」
「... Your wish?」
The topic shifted in an unexpected direction, which made Chamille open her eyes wide. Ikuta showed a dry sense of self mockery.
「That's right. I'm troubled too── Right now, I wish for the Empire's downfall from the bottom of my heart.」
The youth revealed his negative emotions to the speechless girl.
「It's not in my nature to hate something. That is true towards people, much less a country. Hatred isn't something that can be controlled. It is normal for people to direct their hatred towards something that isn't too massive. However── I can't help thinking about it. Because of unavoidable events, I lost many people important to me. The Empire accumulated too many negative karma and took too many things from me. My father, mother, Yatori… The people important to me had been pushed to their deaths by the Empire. That Trisnai Izanma is just a stray flower that bloomed from that soil. The more I realized that, the more I hate this country. Being appointed as the Field Marshal only strengthens this point. Because I'm in a position

to oversee the nation, I have the authority to interfere forcibly at times, and my hatred isn't just a powerless thing any more.」
The youth said bitterly, and thought── being in a position of great power would be a cradle to nurture hatred too. If he wasn't a Field Marshal, he wouldn't be in control of a powerful organization, and he wouldn't be able to exact revenge against the massive Empire. Being able to do something easily would heighten the emotions of a human. And Ikuta Solork was no exception.
「Do you like or hate humans? ── I asked you that just now. You choose 'like' right away. I can't answer that question immediately.
When I hear "humans", I will reflexibly think about the Imperial citizens. The many anonymous and faceless people living in this nation. And── can you believe it? I hate them. Thinking politics and military affairs doesn't concern them, and living wilfully. When there is trouble, they will shamelessly turn to the soldiers── Their way of life frustrates me. I can't help thinking that if they play their role as citizens properly, then the people important to me wouldn't have died.」
「..... T-That's...」
「The coup purged almost all of the corrupted nobles. So the problem is── the people. Right now, I don't hate the military or nobility of the Empire, but everyone else── apathetic people who don't care about anything. The people you watch with loving eyes, are getting uglier in my eyes with each passing day.」
「────!」
「As the urge grew stronger with time, I realized── I will take revenge against this country one day. When I can no longer suppress the hatred in my heart, I will become a cruel existence you won't recognize. I can feel this emotion growing rapidly in my mind.」
Ikuta's hands were trembling. He smiled stiffly at the girl, contemplating that he would either die a hero or live long enough to become a villain.
「So I switched roles with you── I'm sorry, Chamille. Wanting you to live is half the reason, the other half is this. I want the person who betrayed the country to be me. I want to surprise all of them, and show the best mockery in the judicial court, and make them realize their mistake. Not doing anything or thinking about anything── I want to tell them that ignorance is the most serious sin.」
「...!...」
「The death penalty is justified in a sense. Because I will become an enemy of the state one day. Furthermore── thanks to the betrayal, I feel so much better now. Right now, my heart feels that it's fine to end things after enacting my revenge. That's why.. I won't let you take this role.」
After saying the reasons that led to his decision, the youth felt that a load had been removed from his shoulders. From what he had said so far, his work was coming to an end.

□The □Empire□ will be destroyed soon. Isn’t that right, Chamille… The people will ditch their reliance on the military as the Imperial governance will gradually hand over power to the people. Because of my betrayal, this change will be accelerated— That’s my revenge. I think it’s a great compromise.□
□.. Solork...□
□What you need to shoulder is the future. You will be the last monarch of the past government that will guide this country away from Imperialism, and towards a nation ruled by the people. They are still toddlers with unsteady footings, and can’t progress without your assistance. You will support them from the side— until they are independent enough to not need your help any more.
That is the role you really want to play. Unlike the past, where people implant ideas into your mind to lead you towards destruction… After the renewal, you will live together with the people moving in a new way. You will gain happiness through your relationship with them and live on— that’s the lifestyle you really want.□
Ikuta smiled with conviction. Chamille felt something from his demeanour.
□— Do you want to die?□
The girl said with a dry voice, as if she was reading off a script. She reached through the bars and caressed the youth’s face with her palms.
□These eyes, this face, this mouth— will be gone after three days?□
The whole thing still feels unreal to her— She thought she would be the one to disappear. She believed that no matter what would happen in between, it would end with her dying and him living. To achieve that, she spared no effort in everything she did. If she could make him live and let herself die, Chamille was prepared to do whatever it takes.
□That’s right. I won't be able to see the world you build without me".□
The youth said as he let the girl’s fingers caress him. When she heard that, Chamille felt a chill from her feet.
She imagined a world without him. She thought about her life after this. Her mind drifted to the big empty bedroom without her roommate, and her hollow, empty self sitting motionlessly. That scene was more terrible than any hell she had seen.
□—No.□
□...Chamille?□
□No— I don’t want that. I don’t want you to disappear. Never!□
Chamille’s emotions turned from 0 to 100 in an instant. Her hands reaching through the bars grabbed the youth’s shoulders with all her might. Looking at the girl’s face who was afraid of losing him, Ikuta asked in tone that was calm in contrast:
□... Can you tell me, why you don’t me to disappear?□
The girl shuddered when she heard that. She moved her lips, searching for a reason to keep him in this world.

「I-I will lose my conversational partner. There isn't anyone staying in my room that would listen to me talk when I wake up in the middle of the night.」
「I see, that's a serious problem── but I think Vackie will be happy to accompany you. She loves being physically intimate, and will take the initiative to cuddle. If you feel lonely, feel free to bring her to your room.」
「T-That girl won't do. She's not gentle at all. Every time, we will end up wrestling.」
「You can ask Haro then. Your mood will get better if she pats your head. You can let her spoil you, and she will be happy to see you rely on her.」
「H-Haro── Oh right, Haro is weak in chess! If I want an intellectual challenge, she won't be able to keep up!」
「You can ask Torway or Matthew then. I had a match with Matthew recently, he had gotten a lot stronger. You can't let your guard down against him. Why don't you try it next time?」
「No! That's not it...!」
Chamille grew anxious as she failed to convey her true thoughts── What should she say to make him understand? How should she put it so he would realize the seriousness of the issue and change his mind. She kept thinking and thinking── and then said:
「T-The warmth will be gone.」
「... Ehh?」
「R-Recently, I realize, when I'm with you── the region around my chest will feel warm like a candle fire. When we lean on each other, it feels as comfortable as basking in the sun… I-If we cuddle a little too intensely, I would feel very excited… It feels warm by your side. Torway, Matthew and Haro are warn too, but it's the warmest when I'm by your side...」
The girl said with her hand on the center of her chest… When she was by the youth's side, what was it about him that gave her salvation? After thinking about it, she decided on the answer 「the inconceivable warmth that she feels without being touched」. When Ikuta heard that, he smiled gently.
「Hey, Chamille. Do you remember what you said earlier? The thing you didn't have when you were born in the palace or in Kioka.」
He said as he placed his hand on his chest just like Chamille was doing── as if to show that he felt the same warmth she was feeling.
「This is it. You already know── it's sensation, temperature and form.」
「――――」
「I always thought it was boring to interject verbally. But this time, it will be meaningless if I don't say this directly. When the other party can feel it, then that thing will come into existence for the first time.
But the key is to convey your emotions with words… Doing so is a type of proof. To confirm in the future that this thing actually existed.」
After Ikuta said these mysterious words, he inched close to the bars on his knees. The girl's entire body was reflected in his black pupils.

"When we first met, you were just a kid… You have grown, Chamille. Can I watch you from a closer distance?"
"Y-Yes…"
Chamille would never refuse that, and let the youth approach her. He leaned his face to the edge of the bars, then made another request.
"Can you come closer? Come as close to the bars as you can."
"Huh? Erm, I-I understand. H-How about this——— Hmm?"
The moment she leaned in close, her lips were sealed.
The foreign sensation permeates the girl's entire body—— she had been kissed in other places before. Be it the cheeks or her forehead, she would feel a sweet and numb sensation that threatens to melt her away.
This was incomparable to that. Their lips were just touching, so why did this feel so amazing? This question flashed in her mind, and she even lost her wits to analyze why.
"——, ——"
She resolved to stay this way forever. There was no reason not to—— since the youth was so close to her. She didn't wish for time to stop, because time had already stopped for her. She floated and melted in this warmth, and her heart was slowly filled.
"——— Ahh——"
But that time still ended. The meetings between mortals would always be beset with farewells. She wept because of the whimsicalness of it all. Ikuta looked lovingly into her wavering eyes from up close—— and then said:
"this is an adult kiss… I'm sorry that it's a little intense. But this is part of my final gifts."
"———"
The dazed girl accepted his words. After that, Ikuta embraced Chamille tightly. It wasn't a kiss this time, he pushed her head to his shoulder and held her tightly.
"… I will say this only once. I won't repeat myself, so listen carefully."
He urged her to brace herself mentally, then whispered in her ears:

「Chamille, I love you.」
—Snap! Chamille felt she heard something snapping.
Something invisible that had been binding the girl's soul broke at that moment.
They hugged for a long time. They both knew that when they stop hugging, their time together would be over. Chamille hugged Ikuta with all her might, and refused to let go.
But it was time for them to part. Ikuta squeezed Chamille's stiff body hard as if he was reluctant to let go 」then pulled off her arms and left the girl's side.
「We will part here… I won't meet you all until it's over.
Captain Lucanti, I'm counting on you to handle the rest. Stay by Chamille's side together with Vackie and Yorga. And… Don't let her come here again.」
「… Yes. By your will.」
The female knight waiting some distance away accepted this request and saluted smartly, then respectfully picked up the girl. Her movements weren't rough at all, but emitted a firm will that left no room for negotiations.
「Ahh— W-Wait, Lucanti. Wait, Solork. I-I still haven't…!」
Chamille yelled as she was brought outside. She tried to break free from the female knight's grasp, but failed miserably. The youth's figure behind bars was gradually covered by the walls. Her last sight of his profile had a gentle smile and tears.
「————Solork————!」
Her cries for the youth echoed throughout the prison. She was carried out of the prison and the echo subsided— but her voice continued to linger in his ears.
「…… Okay.」
After his time with Chamille was over, and spending half the day in silence, he got up from his bed and walked to the table at a corner of the cell. After troubling over it for a while, he sat down before the desk that had high quality paper and pen.
「… But… what should I write?」
「Don't you have anything to write, Ikuta?」
Kusu toddled over to Ikuta who was wondering what to write. The youth picked Kusu up and placed it on the table, then grunted.
「It's hard to decide… My love confession just ended.」
He started pondering. After thinking for about ten minutes, he wrote something— and an hour later, he crushed up the paper and tossed it away.
「Give up, give up. This isn't my style. I finished what i need to do, so I will slack as much as I want.」
Ikuta left the table after saying that, then went to the bed with Kusu. He laid on the bed and placed Kusu on his chest.
「Let's chat, Kusu. I'm glad that you came back. Having someone to talk to makes a huge difference for the last few days.」

「I’m glad to be with you too… And, I’m sad. My time with you is ending.」
Kusu’s face looked depressed. Ikuta smiled at him.
「After I’m gone, you’ll need to find another partner. What kind of person would you like? I will write down as much details as possible.」
「Thank you, Ikuta. However— I want to go with the flow this time too. Just like how I met you, we won’t pick our masters.」
When he heard Kusu say that, Ikuta thought about the life of Professor Rika and Sapuna he saw in the underground facility. If Kusu didn’t find him when Ikuta collapsed in the streets, he wouldn’t have made it into an orphanage alive. When he thought about that— he realized he was one of the people saved by their kindness after thousands of years.
「Yes, I know. Anyway, you will still be my partner for the next two days. So… Right, let’s play a word chain game, it’s been so long since we last played.」
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiritori
>
Kusu answered with a nod. They had played this since Ikuta was little, a staple activity for Ikuta and Kusu to kill time.
「Soup. Your turn, Kusu.」
「Peas. Your turn, Ikuta.」
「Sugar. Your turn, Kusu.」
「Rice. Your turn, Ikuta.」
They continued in a quick rhythm. Their word chain game continued late into the night.
The sunlight on that day was much gentler than normal.
After bidding farewell to Kusu and leaving his cell, he was transferred to a 「Cathedral」. The executioners led the youth past the capital, and the roads were filled with people. However, no one threw stones or eggs at him. Soldiers were stationed everywhere to prevent any rioting. The youth was frankly grateful for this arrangement as he didn’t want things to be thrown at him on the last day.
Before going to the execution grounds, he made a trip to the 「Cathedral」. According to the customs, the people to be executed would ask God for forgiveness here. And of course— Ikuta didn’t pray to God. Instead, he offered his thanks to Professor Rikka and Sapuna… Because he knew about them, he had things to do in this place. He touched the wall of the 「Cathedral」 on a predetermined spot and gave his thanks.
Ten minutes after making this last detour— He finally reached the end point of his life.
The wooden steps led to a slightly elevated guillotine platform. The position and shape of the blade were unique. A normal guillotine would drop a rectangular blade from above— but the guillotine here uses a crescent shaped blade that turns from the side.
The blade would be pressed down onto a spring to store up potential energy. A rope would be pulled to release the compressed spring— and the

blade would then bounce up and cut down on the head. Compared to the structure of a normal guillotine, its operation was tedious. However— for the youth who designed this guillotine, it had the benefit of simplifying the procedure.

「— Hmm, the weather is great. That's the way it should be.」

Ikuta said quietly as he laid on the platform. Blue sky with a dash of cloud filled his vision, with nothing blocking his view. By designing a spring loaded blade fixed to the side, the space above the guillotine was clear. That was what the youth wanted.

The sight of him lying on the guillotine surprised the people preparing for the execution, but Ikuta winked to signal that 「this is fine」. The sky was right above them, so there was no point in lying face down. He designed the guillotine so that the legs could be stretched out, and let him sleep peacefully under the blue sky.

「...Phew」

He relaxed while lying down, and he should be able to see the lurking crowd if he turned his head, but he didn't do so. It would disturb his sleep if he caught a glimpse of an acquaintance. This was the last biggest stage of his life, but the youth was here to take a nap.

A while later, the executioner informed him that the preparations were done. The spring was loaded, and he could literally end Ikuta with a pull of the rope. The execution time had been decided ahead of time, and the clock was hung in a position where the person to be executed could see. It accurately tells how much time was left. Ikuta yawned and stretched from time to time, and there was less than a minute left.

「.....」

He had no intention of thinking too hard before his death. Thinking too much was the main cause of insomnia. Ikuta emptied his mind and looked blankly up to the sky. The clouds were changing shape slowly as it drifted, and birds flew past it. The youth smiled. It was the same sky as usual.

Less than ten seconds to the execution. He stopped looking at the clock and slowly closed his eyes. He felt a comfortable sense of sleepiness. He smiled. This was a sign of a good sleep.

— With a click, there was a swoosh in the air. Right after that, he felt a strong impact and a floating sensation. The back of his head hit something hard. However, that didn't matter. This was trivial before his sleepiness.

And so— he sprinted in his dream after the vermillion-haired girl who was waiting.

Epilogue

It took a long time before the Empire and Kioka released an official statement regarding the outcome of the war.

The reason was— the two nation's opinions differed on what was victory or defeat. Did the side that failed to capture the capital and retreated lose? Or was the side that declared their loss right after that defeated? The facts, ego and diplomacy mixed together to complicate the matter. But when the casualties on both sides were considered, both sides couldn't continue the war from the losses, so it was a draw.
And the Empire took concrete actions early. With the support of the Parliament, Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik proposed a peace negotiation to achieve a lasting peace between the two nations. And with the anti-war sentiments gaining steam, the peace talk had the support of both the Empire and Kioka.
Shortly after resuming diplomatic relations, news of the Empress pushing for democracy spread across the Empire and Kioka. *Regarding the implementation of Republic governance, we want to lean on the experience of our neighbour*
— the diplomatic officials of both nations were shocked when the Empress said that. However, history proved that she was serious. Two short years later, the Empress declared the abolishment of the Katjvarna Imperial monarchy. Five years later, she voluntarily abdicated the throne.
□
Two o'Clock On a certain day with a gentle breeze, a man with a rectangular luggage on his back was standing before a large mansion.
□Ehh… is it here?□
The man muttered as he took out a note from his pocket. He checked the address against the house before him. Certain that he was right, he mustered his courage and was about to knock the door when—
□Welcome□!□
The door opened, and a five year old child appeared before him. Surprised by the sudden development, the man quickly squatted down to the child's eye level.

「Oh── Good Afternoon. Erm, my name is Torway Remeon. Is your father or mother home?」
「Towelie── Oh! I know, you are Dad's friend! Come in!」
「Really? S-Sorry for the intrusion.」
Feeling a little troubled, the 32 years old Torway Remeon stepped into the house. Shoes were arranged nicely at the entrance. A few belonged to the residents in this house, and his shoes were the only ones soiled by dirt.
「This way! Follow me!」
The energetic child guided him, and he followed him along the corridor. This was a huge mansion, but he wasn't troubled since he grew up in the Remeon house. They reached the entrance of a room in less than a minute, and the child opened the door as Torway watched on.
「Dad」 you have a guest!」
「Oh, welcome. Mecal is the first one to usher in the guest, huh?」
A slightly pudgy youth seated by the window, 32 years old Matthew Tetzirich, looked at the entrance of the room. Before the two men could speak, the child who ran into the room said loudly:
「Dad」 This is Towelie, right!? Your friend Towelie!」
「It's Torway. Your habit of changing words to make them easier to pronounce is happening again. But it's great that you welcomed the guest properly. Well done」」
「Hehehe」!」
Matthew patted the child's head with a fatherly touch, encouraging the child who did his chore well. Torway smiled at that scene and walked to his war buddy.
「Good Afternoon, Ma-kun. Your son is growing up well, does he take after Pommy-san?」
「Hmm」looks aside, his character resembles me more. I seem to be like that when I was young.」
「Oh I see── Ah, the other two kids are here too. There and there.」
Torway glanced upwards as he said that. The living room was an open design with the second storey overlooking it. Two children were hiding behind the furniture there. They seemed to be two or three years older than the child who welcomed him.
「H-He found us, Captain」!」 「Retreat! Retreat」!」
The children scampered away in a panic. The active duty sniper smiled awkwardly at Matthew at the sight of them.
「Alice and Baucia are always like that. Seeing them reminds me of your brothers… Although my children are brother and sister.」
「Ahaha… Pretending to be soldiers is a staple in children's games. I used to play that a lot too.」
They thought about their childhood with nostalgia. At this moment── the sound of another set of footsteps came from the corridor. The two looked over at the door that opened again, and a tall woman with a gentle impression walked in behind Mecal.

「Dad! This time, it's Haro! Haro!」
「Ehh, pardon my intrusion… Ah! Matthew-san, Torway-san! Long time no see!」
「Yes, you look well──」
Matthew was about to greet his comrade but suddenly stopped. His face turned tense as he appraised his visitor. The woman cocked her head puzzledly.
「Ermm, what's the matter?」
「..... I won't fall for this because it's been so long. You are not Haro, but Patrenshina, right?」
Matthew keenly pointed that out. When she heard that, the woman gave off a gentle impression── Patrenshina showed a face as if she was looking into the abyss.
「... No way, the fatty saw through me… it's time to retire my spy career...」
「Don't look down on me! You didn't get worse, I worked hard and improved! Despite how I look, I have been working on my eye for people!」
「Yes, I know. After all, Ma-kun is the top candidate to be the Field Marshal in ten years.」
Torway complimented his friend's performance with a smile. Patrenshina's depressed face turned into a smile, and she said with a different tone:
「Ah, I must have surprised you. Sorry, Patrenshina said she wants to test whether she could deceive you two.」
「Oh, it's Haro this time. It's been a while, how have you been?」
「Yes! I'm still in the same military unit, but I took on a research role this time, and have gotten fat from the lack of exercise.」
「Haro-san published a battlefield medical thesis which was well received by the higher ups. I studied it too, and the post amputation recovery rate numbers are really shocking. I didn't expect the death rate to be so high...」
「Uwah, I'm glad that you read it! I worked hard to gather the data, and I hope it will be the foundation for improvements in the future...」
The three of them shared their recent news. It had been a long time since they last met, so they had plenty to talk about. But they would miss a good time to stop, and before that happened, Matthew stood up from his chair.
「... Don't keep standing there, sit down and have some tea.」
「I agree! Is Her Highness coming too?」
「That's the plan, but she is very busy, so she might be late── come, let's go to the drawing room.」
The host led the way, and the three of them headed for the drawing room.
「... It had been ten years, huh? The Empire and Kioka changed a lot since then.」
Matthew said as he poured tea into three cups. Haro would usually be the one to brew the tea, so Matthew felt refreshed to serve his friends in his own home. He used the most expensive tea leaves to make up for his skill difference with Haro, but it's not enough. After giving everyone a cup, Torway said:

「That's right, I would call it the Empire out of habit, but it's the Katjvarna Republic now. A subordinate told me recently that the kids just call our country Katjvarna.」
「We can't tell which nation you mean if you just say Republic… But to think the Imperial monarchy ended just like that. There is a trend since the Parliament was set up, but I thought it will take 50 years before the transition is over.」
「Because Her Highness pushed for it with tremendous speed. The Parliament that was mocked when it was first formed, is now an outstanding governance body. Her Highness is still very active during parliamentary seatings.」
Matthew said as he sipped on the tea he brewed. It didn't taste bad, but it was still a little bitter. Giving himself 60 points, he put the cup down.
「Compared to that, the changes in the military are comparatively stable. But it's still completely different compared to ten years ago. Especially the cooperation with the academic fields. We have avoided war in recent years, and are on the trend of downsizing our forces, but the military research seems to be blooming instead. I heard its the same for Kioka.」
「Balloon and Wind Rifle and Blast Cannon── Ten years ago, there were many technological breakthroughs in a short period of time. Both side must have felt the importance of technological research from that?」
「We aren't hostile to each other any more, but there's no end to the preparations for the next war… I have complicated feelings about this… Frankly speaking, no matter what new weapons we make in the future, I don't want to fight with Kioka again.」
「How's the navy doing? I heard Pommy-san got promoted to Naval Commander.」
「Like the army, there is a trend of it downsizing, but Admiral Jurgus is still working hard. We finally converted all the ships in the first Fleet into Blast Cannon ships recently. But that person hates Blast Cannon, and even complained that the next war won't be interesting.」
「You two had the issue about who will marry into whose house, right? It seems the situation didn't change much from before…」
「Not only do things appear that way, it is actually the truth. Because of our flawless cooperation that won the naval battle, my cooperation with Pommy made it hard for either of us to marry into either house. Our home is also built in a place that isn't close to the sea or the land, and I really like this carefree place.」
「And you are pumping out kids at a quick pace. Pommy-san is expecting a fourth, right?」
「That child was born last month. Pommy is pushing me to make a fifth one. She really likes kids. I don't hate them, but I think we should stop around the fourth one…」

Matthew showed a clear face of annoyance and crossed his arms. Realizing that the two of them were looking at him with warm eyes, Matthew quickly changed back to his original posture.
"Hey, enough about me, what about you? Torway, we aren't getting any younger, it's about time for you to have a scandal or two."
"Hmm… scandal, huh… About that, my father arranged a few marriage meetings for me…"
"Of course, you are a hot item. And the results?"
"None of them feels compatible with me… Ahahaha, not marrying Ik-kun or Yatori-san is a failure after all……"
"You sound like you are joking, but you are actually serious, huh. Well, I'm not surprised… But if you want to find a spouse like them, then you will probably be forever alone."
Matthew said, concerned about his friend's future. Torway thought for a while before changing the topic:
"… It's not me, but there is news about my brothers… I guess?"
"Colonel Sarihasrag and Lieutenant Colonel Sushuraf? Who's the lucky girl?"
"Well── Sushuraf proposed to Major Mittokarifu. But she didn't accept him…"
Matthew's hand on his teacup stopped at his lips and turned stiff. Haro didn't react in such an exaggerated way, but she also looked surprised.
"…… Seriously? That "Demon"Major Mittokarifu? Y-Your brother is amazing…"
"Suya-san isn't that scary. She was depressed when Ikuta-san passed away… But she is a kind and understanding person by nature. If he is proposing and understands that, then I hope Lieutenant Colonel Sushuraf can work hard."
"There was some problem before he progressed to the state of marriage proposal… Sushuraf-nii started by recommending Sariha-nii to be Major Mittokarifu's marriage partner. They would argue fiercely when they are assigned to the same unit, but would miraculously bring about great results… Sushuraf-nii thought highly of that, and recommended big brother to her."
"… I'm afraid of hearing the results. What happened next?"
"… In the end, Major Mittokarifu rejected that idea, she would rather use the lottery to pick one of her subordinates…"
Matthew thought about that dismissive line and wanted to grab his head. But Torway continued:
"The problem started here. After learning that she would never marry Sariha, I heard Sushuraf-nii thought about it for a moment before suggesting── why don't you marry me?"
Silence hung over the three of them for the second time. Haro asked timidly:
"T-That… Is that the proposal…?"

「That's right… I guess it's only natural that he got rejected? I even thought about apologizing to Major Mittokarifu…」
「… From your tone, there's more to this?」
「…Yes. Because Sushuraf-nii is very patient, so after Major Mittokarifu turned him down, he nodded and said 「I will ask you again after waiting two years」.」
「T-Two years later…?」
「Yes. If Sushuraf-nii says so, he will really ask two years later. I think he is making all sorts of preparations to improve his chances for his next proposal. However… with how things are, I can't tell what will happen in the future…」
Torway's words were 80% unease and 20% expectations. Matthew thought about it and shrugged in resignation.
「… Yes, sigh, I can only cheer them on. Lieutenant Colonel Sushuraf might be dense, but once you get to know him, he's a nice guy. More importantly, I feel relieved that someone is proposing to Major Mittokarifu. It's too pitiful to be in Ikuta's shadow for so long.」
Matthew said with a sigh. Torway looked at him in shock.
「Huh…? Sorry Ma-kun, what do you mean by that?」
「Ahh?… Hmm, wait, you didn't know? You two might be from different units, but there are plenty of chances for you two to converse, right?」
Matthew said in surprise, and explained the relationship between those two from what he had observed. Torway crossed his arms as if he was facing a tough mathematical problem.
「… I never noticed. She was always complaining about Ik-kun, so I thought they didn't get along.」
「Are you blind!? Not all people on earth expressed your feelings that directly!」
Matthew couldn't help retorting. He was both dumbfounded and moved that his 32 years old friend had the social sense of a teen. He tossed the topic to his peer.
「… What about you, Haro? You have a lot of chances to meet people there, right?」
「Hmm, well」 there are people who showed interest in me… But just like Torway-san, I'm a citizen of the 'failed to marry Ikuta-san nation'…」
「I understand, Haro-san. I really get it.」
「Don't empathize with each other! Don't create a weird country! And how many people does that country have!?」
Matthew shouted at the two who were nodding at each other. Haro suddenly said as if she remembered something:
「I'm just a side character to liven the mood… But Nanak-san is living in Central. What is she doing nowadays?」
「Oh, she is energetically playing her role as the head of the Shinnack Tribe in the Yunakura province. After the Aldera Holy Army withdrew from the Grand Arfatra Mountains, some of her tribesmen returned there. But there

are many who had taken roots on the plains, and Nanak plans to focus on the plains too.」
After saying what he knew, Matthew shut his mouth again. He remembered something and added:
「I don't know if she has any scandals… But I got drawn into a drinking session between her and Major Mittokarifu. I was forced to listen to them cursing, complaining and how they miss Ikuta, it was a party from hell. Sigh, but it's great that they become energetic the next morning...」
「Nanak-san was busy taking care of her Shinnack Tribemates during the Judicial trial, and couldn't participate in the situation here… Compared to Suya who spoke directly with Ikuta, that's a different kind of pain… I want to chat properly with them the next time we meet.」
Haro, who was concerned about the feelings of the two women, said.
Matthew and Torway looked at her kindness that had not changed with nostalgia in their hearts.
Regarding the woman he considered his teacher, there was something that puzzled the man.
After realizing her personality had changed beyond redemption, the man decided to strip away her power with his own hands. He wished he realized this earlier, and he didn't hesitate doing so. People accused him of being an ingrate and a traitor, but he couldn't just leave his changed teacher alone.
However── on that final day. When he was going to end her political career. His teacher smiled at him.
The man didn't understand. Why would she smile so gently at the man who betrayed her? Until this day, he still couldn't understand the true meaning behind that smile.
And now, the man was in the exact same situation as his teacher.
「── The time for you to give up that seat has come, Kyakushii Sir.」
In the Parliament House situated in the Kioka Republic Capital Norandot, the Prime Minister's Office. The man who participated in every election and defended this post every time, finally lost his seat.
「... What a late rebellious phrase── no, maybe you're just at the age where you're envious of your father's possession? Personally, I would rather gift you the top post in the Kioka army.」
Seated on the chair in the deepest part of the room, a middle man in a deep blue suit── the Kioka Republic former Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii said these words calmly. Standing before him were familiar faces. Jean Arkinex, Miara Gin, Taznyado Harrah, Elulufay Tenerexilla and Greg Ayuzadori. The biggest difference compared to a decade ago was that they were in formal attire instead of in uniform.
「Unfortunately, he won't accept that gift. Because everyone has their own preference for the texture of their chair. It's bad to force someone to sit in a chair not suited for them, Ario.」
The 「Great Mother of White Wings」 said with a sarcastic tone. That nickname had already spread to the masses. The retired Rear Admiral had

the support of the minority races in Kioka, and was an ally of Jean Arkinex on the battlefield. And now, she would fight alongside him in the political realm.

「To think the two people who are like my adoptive son and daughter will turn on me at the same time… I might look fine, but it's a big surprise for me. Can I have an explanation? Why did you choose this path? Why can't you be a soldier under my regime?」

「H-How dare you say that──!」

That question made Miara retort in surprise. However, Jean raised his arm to stop her.

「I will say it, Miara… He's my adoptive father.」

Jean's face was a mixture of emotions and resolve. Miara noticed his feelings and stepped back.

「……」

And so, the youth faced off against his adoptive father. This wasn't a simple father and son talk. He was the exceptional talent who debuted in the political scene like a comet seven years ago, garnered major support in this short amount of time, and finally defeated Ario Kyakushii in the recent election. Kioka Republic Army retired Major General── and reigning Kioka Republic Prime Minister Jean Arkinex.

「I really respect you, Kyakushii Sir. Thanks to you finding me, I get to polish my talents with your support, and participate deeply in the future of the nation. When I was a soldier, I was always thinking about answering your expectations.」

「……」

「But as time passed, I realized something. You hope I can become a hero, but not for me to be happy. I think your philosophy is that a person can't achieve both. After learning that, I was troubled… But I quickly realized something. It's dangerous for someone who thinks this way to represent the nation.

I can accept it if Kioka can prosper with just my sacrifice. Because my existence would be an exception, and no one else would be sacrificed like me. However, you want this system to continue permanently. Your goal is to create a society that runs by running heroes to the ground. I can never accept that.」

Jean confessed with a bitter face. Ario responded frankly to his son's struggle:

「In all societies there will always be a group that gets exploited. Will it be slaves? Labourers? The bottom ranked citizens? No matter how one chooses or names them, the only difference is how they are exploited.

However… won't it be poetic if a hero is one of the exploited group? People who fight without any regard for themselves must be noble, right? Since we need fuel to run a nation── I hope it can be the most beautiful existence of all humanity. Because a nation that walks this path will be the most beautiful country in the world.」

Ario explained his reason. However, Jean objected his view of this beauty:
「... In the country you want to build, heroes are the only beautiful existence. I can't bear the sight of the millions of people who are willing to exploit their lives for such a society to function.」
「If you are suggesting that we distribute the burden equally, you can go with communism. You will learn how badly humans do in a completely equal society. I can tell you this for sure── no matter what kind of society you are visualizing after kicking me out, there will always be an exploitative element. When you acknowledge that, you will wish: 「This isn't how things should be, will a hero from somewhere come and help me──?」」
Ario discussed the assumption that the other party should hate the most. However, Jean didn't falter. After finding back his sleep, he had accumulated many years of thinking to support him, which made him fearless.
「I will never wish for that. My vision is for many people who aren't heroes to run the country. It might be far from a perfect nation── but I won't give up on anything. Even if an exploitive element is inevitable, we should switch the targets depending on the time and place. Some will sacrifice at this time, and others will gain at other times── when such a system becomes natural, and the society treats sacrifices and gains to be natural, it won't be exploitation anymore.」
Jean stared right at his adoptive father as he said. Ario felt impressed── shaking the beliefs and values of his opponent was his forte. And he raised this youth before him too, so Ario knew his thinking, habits and trends. Ario could usually make Jean waver and compel him to listen── but this wouldn't work on Jean anymore.
「────Hmm?」
He felt a strange sensation in his mouth, and touched his fingers. He could feel the corners of his mouth twitching a little── He was smiling. It wasn't his usual perfect politician smile. The feelings in his chest were making him smile without him realizing it.
「... Ahh──」
He smiled awkwardly at his own denseness── if he tried to see things subjectively, the answer was obvious. This young man that he nurtured with the plan to exploit to the end── has shown an entirely different way of thinking, and raised the flag of rebellion with his group of friends.
「── So this is how you felt, Teacher?──」
Ario realized this wasn't anything surprising. He accepted that smiling at this moment was only natural── That's right, because it's only natural for a parent to feel happy by their child's independence.
The last bit of resistance vanished from Ario's mind. He sighed heavily, then stood up from the chair he had sat in for many years.
「My apologies for taking up your time, I will hand my seat over to you── from now on, this will be your room, Jean.」

He started walking and stopped before his son who had his chest puffed out high. Ario reached out and patted Jean’s head. Just like what he did when Jean was still young.
“… After you started sleeping again, your hair has turned grey. Your white hair might be pure and beautiful—”
“……”
“— But your grey hair isn’t bad either. This is the colour that shows you have learned many things. Staying grey as you strode forth in a world that isn’t completely separated into black and white… Grey is a colour for politicians.”
The man pulled back his hand and walked past Jean. When he left the office, he said to his son without looking back:
“It is different from the battlefield, but this is also a harsh world— work hard, my son. If you don’t want me back in that chair, then don’t show any openings.”
He then left with that. Jean watched him leave— then bowed silently.
Ario left the Parliament house as the Senators watched with all sorts of gazes. The sky was a little dark outside with a light drizzle. But surprisingly, a woman around his age was standing there with an umbrella.
“Thank you for your hard work, Hubby.”
“—Saram?”
Ario looked at his wife with his eyes wide open. Saram walked over and covered her husband under her umbrella.
“It’s rare to see you at the Parliament house. Why the sudden visit?”
“I came to watch since I might see the scene of your defeat.”
The serious Saram answered nonchalantly. Ario suddenly smiled:
“That is right. I was badly beaten by my son’s group, and chased out of my favourite Prime Minister’s chair.”
“That’s great.”
“T-That’s great?”
Ario was shocked by that. Ignoring her stunned husband, Saram took out a piece of paper and handed it to him. It was a newspaper clipping promoting the tourist spots in Mamulan.
“I always wanted to visit this place. But just the trip there will take more than a week, so it’s hard for me to make time for myself. But since you are no longer a politician, you should be free. Want to go with me?”
“… No, my political career is…”
Ario said puzzledly, the last part of his words faded away as his wife stared at him. The man suddenly put his hands on his hips with a smile.
“… Sigh, this is fine too. I have enough of being a politician, it isn’t bad being your husband for a while.”
“How considerate. But Hubby, do you know what kind of work a husband should do?”
She asked a sassy question. Ario strokes his chin and thought about it:

「A politician works to improve the lives of the people. So the work of a husband… is to make you smile?」
He answered with a hint of sarcasm. Saram shook her head gently.
「That's a second rate husband. A first rate husband── will achieve happiness together with his wife.」
She told him and gently pushed her husband's back. The two of them left the Parliament house in the gentle drizzle at dusk.
The three of them chatted until daybreak with a meal in between. After sleeping in their respective rooms, they woke up at noon. After washing up, they gathered in the drawing room again.
「We already chatted the night away. Her Highness sure is slow.」
「That's right. She didn't contact us, so maybe she can't come this time. Something urgent might have──」
Matthew held the steaming cup of tea, and didn't speak as he caressed the engraving on the table. Suddenly, a sound of strong wind blowing entered their ears.
「──? What's that sound? I have never heard this before...」
「... Let's take a look outside!」
Matthew became wary after failing to ascertain the source of that noise. He told the children to stay in the house, then ran to the entrance. With Torway and Haro following him, the three of them rushed out and searched for the source of the noise.
「──Matthew-san, over there!」
The first one to notice was Haro. The other two were looking at ground level, but the object was shining high near the afternoon sun.
「W-What is that?」
Matthew mumbled in shock. As the three of them stared stiffly, the silhouette of a large bird in the distance grew larger, until it became as large as a house before landing close to them── it landed on its wheels, then used the road near the mansion to decelerate before stopping before the trio. The spinning propeller stopped, and the roaring sound of the wind ceased.
「── Long time no see, Torway, Haro, Matthew! So all three of you are here!」
The window on top then opened, and a woman appeared. The three of them looked at that face in surprise, while the subject jumped down from the mysterious transportation vehicle.
「Sorry for being late! It was more difficult getting used to controlling this thing than I expected! I flew here after I learned it── this is a really reliable vehicle! I can take you for a spin right now!」
A cheerful voice entered their ears, and they turned to the source of the voice── beautiful waist long hair, eyes filled with energy and curiosity. Her light attire showed her active lifestyle with a sabre and short sword on either side of her waist.

The 27 years old Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik was standing before them. Now that the monarchy has ended in Katjvarna, her presence has grown limitlessly compared to her time as the 「Empress of Destruction」. Torway took a step towards her in clear surprise.
「Y-You have changed a lot, Your Highness. You have changed some time back too, but now…」
「It's nothing, I just eat, sleep and play as much as I want, and go wherever I wish. Thanks to that, I built up a bit of stamina.」
Chamille snorted and puffed her chest out. She was about to continue to chat with the trio when her shoulders suddenly quivered.
「── Over there, suspicious people!」
She yelled as she turned and drew out her saber, knocking away a pebble flying her way. Her sharp gaze turned towards the bushes, where tiny presences were moving quietly.
「Kyaa」 they found us again!」 「I thought it will work this time」!」
Matthew's children, who got spotted by Torway when they peeked yesterday──Alice and Baucia, rushed out of the bushes in a panic. Pre-empting their attempts to escape home, Chamille blocked their path with her legs wide apart.
「How dare you hide and snipe me── Matthew, are they your kids?」
「Y-Yes, they are my daughter Alice and son Baucia. Sorry, they like to pull pranks── You two, apologize to Her Highness!」
「Uwah」! Sorry!」「I'm sorry」!」
The children who had nowhere to run started apologizing in tears. Chamille cocked her head in confusion.
「Hey, why are you crying? The fun is just about to start, I won't play with crybabies, you know.」
「…Ehh?」「You will play with us?」
「Didn't you plan to play in the beginning? Don't just give up after your sneak attack fails, try to list the reflection points and how to improve your plan. Then next time, you can hit me right between the eye!」
Instead of reprimanding them, she was inciting them instead. She said to the surprised children with a fearless smile:
「But it's polite to tell the other party before starting your game. Hitting an unaware opponent is despicable. It is understandable in a real battlefield, but this is a peaceful place. If you do that again, you won't just be despicable, but will also be a villain who disturbs the peace, okay?」
「I-I'm not despicable.」「I don't want to be a villain」!」
「That's good. I can save the effort of punishing you── let's continue. From the sticks on your waist, you want to fight a melee battle?」
Chamille said as she took off her sword belt and handed it to Torway for safekeeping. She took two tree branches she found nearby as their replacement. Their uneven lengths matched the weapons she had on her.
「Alright, come at me, bro. I will train with you!」
「Uwah, wah」!」「Hyaa」!」

The kids pounced at the playmate who came from the sky. Matthew stared wide eyed at Chamille who blocked a head on slash.
「Hey… Look at that...」
She didn’t lose balance despite moving continuously. Her dual swords techniques easily parried the slash. She was playing with kids, but there was a high level of martial arts behind her movements. Even if it were two bandits attacking her, the same thing would happen.
「... I can tell, Matthew. This is like watching Yatori-san──」
Torway said with a trembling voice. At this moment── the battle came to an end. Without scoring a hit, the two kids laid on the ground exhausted. Chamille who wasn’t even breathing hard stood firm in contrast, and snorted.
「You two lack training! Start over from running!」
「Ughh……W-We lost……」
Chamille smiled as she looked down at the exhausted children, then tossed her stick aside before walking back to the trio. Torway returned the swords he was safekeeping and said:
「You have nice moves, Your Highness. Are you learning swordsmanship?」
「Yes, just a bit from Honorary Field Marshal Igsem. I’m armed with dual swords, so I should at least learn a little.」
「Chuuu～! Chamille is so cool～!」
A voice praising her reached the ears of the trio. They looked over in surprise and saw a ladder set down Chamille’s vehicle, and two familiar white coated figures climbed down. A man wearing a monocle followed behind a dark haired woman with wobbly steps. He almost fell off, but was supported by that woman. Matthew said to them in surprised:
「... So it’s Vackie and Yorga! You came along with Her Highness? … By the way, why is someone down?」
「He is air sick. Either the plane is a mustang or the handling is too rough, this thing shakes a lot.」
Vackie wasn’t the one who answered, but the fourth person who got off the plane. The man raised a hand with a grin. Seeing Senpa Sazarf who was almost 40 years old, Matthew, Torway and Haro all showed bright smiles.
「──Lieutenant General Sazarf! You’re here too!?」
「Yo, I wanted to get down earlier, but I was feeling a little dizzy. I’m better now── Heave ho!」
Sazarf didn’t use the ladder and jumped right down. When he approached the group, Matthew asked something he was curious about:
「I forgot to ask… What is this transportation vehicle? It came from the sky, but I don’t see the balloon’s ball sack...」
「Fufufu, you want to know?」
Chamille teased with a snicker. Before anyone answered, she explained to the curious trio:
「This vehicle is called a plane. It’s created by the Sprites with ancient technology, a commonly used vehicle used by the super ancient civilization,

according to Professor Anarai. It can fly freely in the sky through a different mechanic from a balloon.」
「Freely… What do you mean specifically?」
「A carriage in the sky, but that sounds too slow? I can't think of a good example, but this thing is really fast!」
Chamille promised in a firm tone. Considering the functionality of the vehicle before him by her tone, Torway said with a serious face:
「This will cause a military revolution… No, not just that, a transportation revolution. Has mass production started?」
「It's impossible right now. This plane is assembled by excavating ruins and parts, then following the guidance of the Sprites. We can create the fuel, but we can't manufacture the internal components. We can get it repaired in a 『Cathedral』 though.」
「Y-You guys are riding in that thing? What if there is an accident?」
「Like I said, I practiced. Don't worry, emergency landing is one of my best moves!」
Chamille answered boldly and laughed cheerfully. Torway was moved, then walked to Matthew and Haro who were overwhelmed by Chamille's aura.
「... I didn't know Her Highness is so lively...」
「Ehehe『 that's right. Isn't that cool and amazing?」
Vackie could tell that he was in awe and walked to his side. She watched the subject in question and said with the same energy:
「The super beautiful girl I had my eyes on, has grown into a dazzling woman now! To be honest, I never expect her to change so much, it fills me with excitement!」
She kept praising her best friend, but her voice suddenly became quiet.
「That's why, I want Ikuta-nii to see how she is right now.」
Vackie said, the day where she mourned her senior disciple's death still fresh on her mind.
「...Chamille, you are a fortunate girl.」
The white-coat girl said quietly. She could still remember Chamille leaning against the youth's coffin for half a day without moving.
「To live for you and die for you── the only other person Ikuta-nii would only go that far is Yatori-san. Being loved so deeply is such a precious experience… No, you must know that.」
She didn't answer, but Vackie knew that Chamille heard that. Vackie understands Ikuta Solork, her senior disciple, left everything to them after doing that. That's why...
「All of us are the things Ikuta-nii left behind for you. The people who will live with you and support you from now on. No matter how much you struggle, you will never walk alone.」
As her good friend who would always be by her side, Vackie expressed that in clear words. She told the girl how great the things she received were.
「... If you still say that you loathe yourself, I will give you a tight slap!」

Vackie vowed as she said that, and would never give up— she would definitely see that child's true smile.

「———」

The shoulders of the girl leaning on the coffin quivered. Her hands, arms and knees slowly regained their strength.

「— Don't worry, Vackie. I won't say that again.」

She swore as she stood up— She no longer had a reason not to stand up.

「— Yes. That's true… I want to let him see this.」

Torway nodded silently beside Vackie… No one would have believed that the girl who deeply believed that her bloodline was rotten, and was determined to die together with her country— would experience so many things, have so many friends, and smile so energetically.

The Katjvarna citizens under Republican rule often call her 『the last Princess』. But of course, with the abolishment of monarchy, she was no longer an Imperial. Since she voluntarily ceded power to the people, she didn't want to be treated like an Imperial any more.

However, as a young politician who built peaceful diplomatic relations with Kioka, guiding the Parliament to its current state, and improving countless social systems— when people addressed her with respect, they would naturally call her 『Your Highness』. She no longer rejects their show of respect and goodwill.

「— Oh, by the way, I have gotten taller. The specific number is 2.2 cm… Huh? You can't tell? Damn it, you too~!?」

The white-coat admin officer suddenly changed the topic and turned mad. Chamille walked over briskly when she saw that.

『Don't vent your anger on my Knight, Vackie. I know you feel vexed because I surpassed you in various ways in recent years, and also understand your feelings that you think I'm too cool for school.』

『Did you hear that, Ikuta-nii!? That forlorn pretty girl!? She got so thick-faced in just ten years! I feel responsible as a guardian! Ahh— but she is so cool! Me like! Chamille-chan, I super like you!』

Vackie hugged her best friend noisily. Chamille grabbed her forehead and pushed her away, then looked at the Knights Corp trio.

『Alright then— I will bring you three for a tour through the skies. Are you ready?』

「… Huh? You want to bring us for a tour— in that thing?」

『There's no other vehicles here. Don't worry, It will be safe with me at the helm. Right』get in!』

Without giving them time to hesitate, Chamille pushed the trio to the plane and added:

『I forgot to tell you, there's a reason why I'm riding in this thing. Do you remember what the Sprites told us when we reached the Ra Saia Alderamin Underground facility during the Trial of God?』

「I didn’t hear it directly… But I remember it’s the unveiling of ancient civilization Science. The condition is the Empire and Kioka ceasing hostility.」
「That’s right, but the Sprites won’t agree if there is a good possibility of war. So nothing happened for the past ten years when both nation’s political scenes are still unstable. So, what do you think it means if I can build this machine?」
Chamille pointed out an important sign. When they heard that, tension flashed across their faces.
「── The unveiling of the technology is beginning. Enough knowledge to change the world is about to be revealed...」
「That’s how it is. It’s going to get busy!」
Chamille made her prediction when they reached the plane. They climbed up the ladder on her instructions, and entered one by one.
「Uwah、how interesting. It’s cramp inside though.」 「Ehh, I need to tie this belt...?」
「Please drive safely! I don’t want to fall off!」
「Don’t worry, we need to overcome any obstacles head on. So no matter what happens, there is no need to worry── Because the two of them love me.」
Chamille put her hand on her chest, and said the belief deeply anchored in her heart. When Matthew saw that, he knew it would be fine. *You have saved this child, Ikuta.*

「... If that guy is here, will he retort that this is unscientific?」
To hide the feelings welling up from his chest, Matthew intentionally said annoyingly. Chamille refuted with a laugh:
「Then I will rebuke him. Love can’t disperse a storm or protect the plane from lightning. However── love will give me the strength to overcome all that. Although I don’t know how to write down the chemical formula of love.」
She said as she slowly held onto the joystick. She no longer feared living or getting happiness. An adequate amount of tension filled her body, and Chamille declared to the Knights on the plane:
「Alright, we are taking off── You three, grab on tight!」
She pulled the joy stick with her right hand, and the wheel spun on the ground. The plane carrying the four people picked up speed. Chamille glanced at the three of them who had turned stiff from the intense shaking, and manipulated the joystick without any hesitation── And the four of them took off into the vast blue sky.
Their journey is still continuing. They believe their journey will bring them to the distant future, where the other two were waiting──

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In the beginning, everything was blurry and unclear.

But the eyes were opened, and things became clearer.
There were many things in sight, and some of them were moving. Most of the things were relaxed, but others were rowdy for unknown reasons. It felt that things were like this when 「first gaining sight」. On the other side of the shimmering light red waters, there were many eyes looking this way.
That's right. Looking this way. That meant something was here. After thinking about it for some time, I came to the conclusion that they were probably looking at me. They were looking at me. They── that's right, they. A group that wasn't me. I gradually understood. There was one of me here, and many that weren't me.
My field of vision was small, which filled me with dissatisfaction. I couldn't change it in the beginning, and could gradually move it, but soon, it stopped expanding. Not just my field of vision, I should have a bigger range of movement, but couldn't. Did I get things wrong?
When I was getting anxious, they could probably see that too. More of them gathered and made all sorts of noises. It was a little noisy, but interesting too. That's right. I want to hear all sorts of sounds, and see all sorts of colours.
I waited to see if anything would change, then felt troubled. I didn't want to sleep, but I couldn't stop my exhaustion. I gradually stopped seeing and feeling things── everything around me turned blurry and dark.
The moment he woke up── he could sense the silhouette of his entire body.
「────?」
An intense stimulation made him flail his limbs. After floating in a blurry world for a long time, the sensation felt raw and painful. He felt as if his skin had been stripped away, and was being pelted by rain.
There was a sensation of someone rushing over. That person held his hand and calmed him down. After enduring it for a while, the pain gradually eased. All the senses were too intense, but he was relieved that his skin was still intact.
「──── W-Weird?」
And so, he realized it. He realized that he could think. It felt so long since he had a brain that could think, but he didn't really understand what 'so long' meant.
People gathered and asked him all sorts of questions. How do you feel? Does it hurt anywhere? How's your body condition? Do you want to sleep? Can you read this word? And so forth. He could answer most of them, but there were some questions he couldn't answer.
── Do you know who you are?
He couldn't answer that question. One person from the group ran over with a mirror, and he saw himself for the first time. Dark hair and black eyes, a face that gave the impression of someone pretending to be retarded. His age was── around 15 to 16.
After that, his life was a series of tests. They told him to exercise or perform simple calculations, it wasn't painful or troubling, but he couldn't see how

these were relevant to anything. Who was he? Why was he here? The people around him would always fudge through that question.
— Let’s try letting them meet.
One day, someone in the group proposed. Some of them opposed it, but after discussing it for a few days, this suggestion was implemented. They didn’t tell him what was going to happen, so he held a vague sense of unease and expectation.
And so, that moment came.
He was brought out of his usual room, and headed to another place. It was a hall where the stars were visible through the transparent ceiling. A few benches were placed beside potted plants, the place that was obviously meant for many people to use was silent.
After telling to go right in, the people who brought him there stayed behind. He wasn’t told about the purpose or anything else, so he walked forth bafflingly. It has been a long time since he walked in a spacious area, so he was in a good mood. He poked the leaves of the plants and walked further in.
「————」
At the center of the hall, his time stopped.
Someone was standing there. A girl wearing plain white clothes like him, and was around his age. Her vermillion hair flowing down her back was like a raging flame.
The girl turned to look at the boy who was frozen in place. Her eyes were a darker shade of red than her hair. He looked right into her eyes, and didn’t feel any awkwardness when he did so.
「You must be Ikuta.」
The girl said after they locked gazes. That name seemed to seep through his entire body—
「You are Yatori.」
He said the name that flashed across his mind. Amazingly, he didn’t feel that it was strange for them to know each other’s name, despite not knowing their own names.
He looked down at the chair between them. The girl turned around, and the boy sat down on the chair. When the girl saw that, she did the same thing. The boy and girl sat back to back on the same chair, feeling each other’s body warmth.
「... Do you understand what is happening?」
「... Unfortunately, I don’t even know who you are, or who I am.」
Despite what he said, the boy didn’t feel uneasy. He felt satisfied, as if a missing part of him had been filled. He didn’t feel like he needed anything else. So...
「Well, let’s put all that aside for now, and just watch the stars for a while, Yatori.」
He suggested it to the girl as if it was natural. The girl behind him suddenly smiled:

「That's right. Since you said that, I will relax too.」
The girl answered, then looked up at the night sky. The weight leaning on her back felt really comfortable.
The time that belonged to the two of them passed── The stars beyond the ceiling were so beautiful that you would forget the time.
Things had changed with the passage of time under the north star, and their dreams were still continuing.

Afterword

── Ahh, I have finished writing.
Thank you everyone for reading my work. The series 「Wind-up Sprite Chronicles, Alderamin on the Sky」 is now completed.
First, I want to thank everyone who followed the series till this stage. Good work, everyone. And thank you for accompanying this story to the end.
When I wrote the first volume, I knew this would be a very long story. And there is no telling if all the contents will be published. A lot of help is needed for a series to last 14 volumes, and without the support of everyone who wants to read the story to the end, I will not have gotten to this stage. Allow me to feel proud that my writing is worth all that.
Looking back, seven years have passed. I have spent that much time with Ikuta and the others. If I live until I'm 80, then about a tenth of my time is spent writing 「Alderamin」. And now, I can say confidently that this series is the most important work of my life.
I have written all the contents I needed to write in this volume, so I won't discuss it further. Right now, I hope everyone can feel glad that they have read this series.
… And after reminiscing about the after taste of this series, please turn to the next page.
Starting from here will be a completely different story. I, Bokuto Uno, who spent seven years to complete 「Alderamin」, will use the confidence I have accumulated over these years to start a new story.
I'm certain that everyone who reads this far will be intrigued.
The settings of the story will be different, from the war torn world of Sprites and Science, to a world of sword and sorcery filled with supernatural and mysteries… However, since it's a story I wrote, it's nature will still be the same.

Come— Let’s start a story about humans.

Translator’s afterword

The story mentioned in the last 5 paragraphs of the afterword is Reign of the Seven Spellblades
. Volume 14 included a teaser of that series right after the author’s afterword.
After reading through the whole series, I think the theme of the story is Hope. And to draw that out, there needs to be despair, a lot of despair. If a certain character didn’t die in the middle of the series, there won’t be enough despair to keep up with the writer’s theme. But at the same time, it would be too despairing for people to continue.
Normal writers would delay that death closer to the end, or kill that character off early so readers don’t get attached. It takes real guts to do it right in the middle.
Military wise, forming a platoon of 40 soldiers of the same element is just silly. Fire sprites cavalry? Why? Why not let water and light ride horses too? Fire can create light too (which significantly reduces the importance of light in the story), but you need water people to supply the platoon with water. You don’t even use your fire sprite in your attack, you cut people with swords! Leave the fire for the artillery units. You want units that can work independently, not play pikmin.
It will make sense for units to be mostly wind, since they are a long range attack unit. But they received a power up early in the series, and should be outclassing the crossbows in both power and range. They will still need some light sprites for operation use, but most of the infantry should trade for a wind sprite.
The Great Fall is a great plot device to erase all traces of civilization. Everything, including concrete buildings, weapons, and books are erased by the Bertram waves. America chose to lock themselves in underground vault cities, while everyone either became mutants because of an injection, or mutants from the fallout radiation. It will be interesting if someone makes a game about people from these hundreds of vaults wandering out into a nuclear wasteland filled with mutants and crazies.
That ending. Are they trying to simulate a heaven or utopia? It is normal for an ending to loop back to the beginning, so featuring these two characters

at the end makes sense. If you have seen the anime *Darling in the franxx* , you can see how similar their endings are. There really isn’t much in a way to round things off with the way they handled the main characters.
Enough ranting, I hope you got the ending you wanted, have a great day!
P.S. Will take a one week break before starting my next series. It’s a comfy series with no battles at all.

放課後は、異世界喫茶でコーヒーを

Have a cup of coffee at the Cafe in Fantasy World, after school.

Author kazamidori
illust u-suke

風見鶏
illust u介

ファンタジア文庫

Credits

Translation Group: Skythewood
EPUB is done by JLN

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